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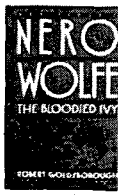


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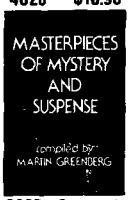


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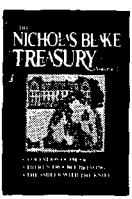


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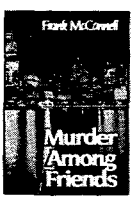


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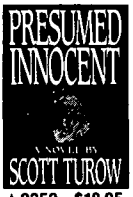


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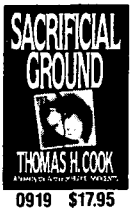


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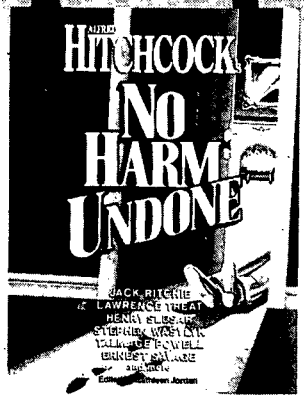


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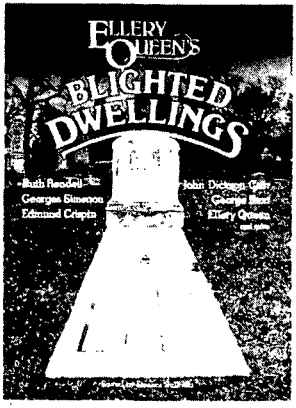


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**a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by**

**EDWARD D. HOCH**

*Art Schraeder was very specific about wanting one of the old Coronado flags, Nick told Gloria when she asked if he couldn't just buy a new one.*

*"When does he want it?" she asked.*

*"I'm planning to scout the consulate tomorrow," Nick told her. "It's on upper Madison Avenue, in the Seventies."*

*"Don't lose any sleep over Sandra Paris," Gloria said. "I'm sure she's not involved . . ."*

# THE THEFT OF THE FADED FLAG

***by EDWARD D. HOCH***

The embassy of the tiny Caribbean nation of Coronado was situated on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, not far from the Naval Observatory and the Vice-President's house. It was in one of several aging mansions that have found new life in the world of international diplomacy, and each morning at sunrise early-rising residents were sure to see the rainbow-colored flag being raised to the end of the pole that protruded from the center window of the top floor.

This particular morning in September seemed no different from any other. The flag of Coronado, looking just a bit faded from the sun, was run to the top of the pole promptly at 7:00 A.M. by the First Secretary of the delegation, a slick-haired man named Leon Oeste. He stood for a moment in the window as he always did, offering a salute as traffic passed below and a newsboy delivered his morning papers. Then he closed it and went down for breakfast with the ambassador.

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Across the street at the entrance to Normanstone Park, Nick Velvet sat in the passenger seat of a compact car driven by a man named Art Schraeder. "That's the flag," Schraeder told him. "I want you to steal it."

"It looks faded. They could use a new one."

"They're replacing it with a new one the first of October. That's why I need it stolen before then."

"No value?" Nick asked. He was extremely particular about what he stole.

"No value. What's a faded flag worth?"

"Twenty-five thousand dollars to *you*, if that's what you're willing to pay me."

"I need the flag, and embassies are well protected. I figured I needed to hire the best in the business."

"You've got him," Nick said.

"Good. And—" Schraeder stopped in midsentence.

"What is it?"

Art Schraeder was craning his neck out the car window. "Where's the damn flag? It's gone!"

"Maybe they had to take it in for some reason."

"They never take it in before sunset. Besides, I was watching it every minute."

"Not the minute it was taken down, obviously."

"Suppose somebody beat us to it? Suppose somebody else stole it?"

Nick tried to reassure him. "It's only seven in the morning. Who'd steal a flag from under our eyes before breakfast?"

But even as he said the words, a possible answer came to him. There was one person, a woman whose path he'd crossed more than once before, who always committed her thefts before breakfast. Sandra Paris, better known in criminal circles as the White Queen.

" 'Impossible things before breakfast,' " Nick said to Gloria back home that evening. "That's her motto."

"You haven't heard anything from or about Sandra Paris in two years," Gloria objected. "You have no reason to think she's connected with this."

"It's just a feeling I have."

"The flag was really stolen?"

"Yes—when the man at the window discovered it was missing, he was out in the street with a couple of security guards looking all

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over for it. Someone even climbed out on the roof in case it had blown up there somehow. They didn't find it."

"But you were down in the street when it happened."

"Apparently."

"So you're out the twenty-five thousand?"

"Maybe not. Schraeder tells me there's another flag like it at the Coronado consulate in New York. He says that one will do just as well."

"Couldn't he just buy a new flag?"

"He's very specific about wanting one of the old ones. I've had far stranger requests in my time."

"When does he want it?"

"I'm planning to scout the place tomorrow. It's on upper Madison Avenue, in the Seventies."

"Don't lose any sleep about Sandra Paris," Gloria told him. "I'm sure she's not involved."

The following day, Nick took the train into New York and rode the Lexington Avenue subway to Seventy-seventh Street. Walking briskly over to Madison, he observed that no police were on duty in front of the Coronado consulate as they were at some of the other diplomatic missions around Manhattan. The familiar rainbow flag with its obscure seal in the center was in place on the flagpole at the third-floor window.

At first he barely noticed the well dressed grey-haired woman who strolled by, trailing an eager little poodle on a leash. And he might have taken no notice when she turned back and retraced her steps if the poodle hadn't leaped up on him, as if intent on calling attention to its mistress. As soon as he saw the grey-haired woman's eyes, he knew.

"Hello, Sandra."

"Hello, Nick. It's good to see you again."

"What brings you here?"

"I'm living just a few blocks from here." Then, to the poodle, "Get down, Bon Bon! Behave yourself!"

"Your hair has gone completely grey in just two years," Nick observed with a trace of irony.

She arched an eyebrow at him, a mannerism he remembered from their earlier meetings. "Suppose you buy me a cup of coffee. It's always fresh at the place across the street."

"It would be a pleasure, Sandra."

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Over coffee she came to the point. "What are you up to, Nick? What are you doing here?"

"You mean outside the Coronado consulate? I might ask the same of you. Why are you wearing a wig and walking your dog back and forth in front of the building?"

"It's business," she said simply.

"Was it business yesterday morning in Washington, too?"

She lowered her eyelids and dipped her head to take a sip of coffee. "You were there?"

"Yes. A bit too late."

"Then it appears we're after the same thing."

"The faded flags of the nation of Coronado."

She smiled. The time for pretense was past. "Correct."

"How did you get that flag off the pole yesterday?"

"That's my secret."

"Who are you working for?"

"Another secret. Obviously not the same person who hired you."

"What makes these old flags so valuable all of a sudden?"

She shrugged. "I don't ask questions."

"Are we going to have a fight over that flag?"

"Not at all," she said smugly. "I'm taking it tomorrow morning. If you want it, you'll have to beat me to it."

"How did you manage it yesterday, Sandra?"

"Want to see it again? Come by tomorrow morning. I don't mind playing to an audience."

Nick knew it would be virtually impossible for him to steal the Coronado flag once it had been stored away for the night. Prowling around a strange building in the dark, with no idea of his goal, was out of the question. That only left the time when the flag was taken down, around seven P.M. if they did it at sundown.

It was obvious that the flagpole couldn't be reached from the street without attracting attention. The flag had to be stolen from inside the building. When the door opened for a visitor, he could see a formidable-looking guard seated just inside. If there was any sort of back entrance to the consulate, it was completely blocked from the street. A narrow alleyway running between the buildings had a firmly locked iron gate.

Nick took a chance and entered a small dress shop in the building next door. The woman clerk was surprised and a bit apprehensive at the sight of him. "Health inspector," he explained, showing a

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badge and I.D. that he carried for such occasions. "We've had a report of a foul odor that seems to be coming from the back of your store."

"What?" The young woman wrinkled her brow in disbelief. "You've got to be kidding!"

"All I know is what they tell me. Have you a back door to the shop?"

She seemed dubious. "The owner's not here right now. I shouldn't—"

"If there's no odor, I'll be finished in a minute," he assured her.

"All right," she decided. "Follow me."

He noticed a nameplate on her blouse identifying her as Ms. Shepherd. Her green-and-white dress was casual but smart. They walked through the stock room and she opened a side door. Nick saw that it led onto the same narrow passageway he'd observed from the street. "See? There's no odor."

"Isn't there a back door?"

"This is the only other door."

Nick sniffed the air. "Well, I don't detect any odor. I'm sorry to have troubled you."

A bell sounded inside the shop at the front. "I have a customer," she said. She closed and bolted the door and escorted Nick back into the shop, where a middle-aged woman was glancing through a rack of dresses.

Out on the street, Nick walked away quickly without a glance at the Coronado consulate. Ms. Shepherd had provided him with everything he needed.

The dress shop closed promptly at six, a full hour before sundown, and Nick was waiting across the street when the Shepherd woman locked the front door and headed uptown. During his few minutes in the shop, he'd managed to check the lock on the front door and slice through a key wire on the alarm system. Now it took him only a moment to cross Madison Avenue and walk up to the door as if he belonged there. He had it unlocked in less than ten seconds and was inside without the alarm sounding. Passersby paid no attention. He walked through the shop to the side door, disconnected the alarm there, and opened it.

Once in the alley separating the two buildings, he walked to the rear. There had to be a reason for the alley and the most likely one was to provide access to the consulate kitchen for deliveries and rubbish removal. He found the door to the kitchen standing open behind an unlocked screen door. The cooks were busy with dinner

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preparation and only one bare-chested dishwasher noticed him. "Who are you?" the man asked in Spanish.

"Health inspector," Nick answered, flashing his badge. "Put on a shirt or I'll have to write you up for a violation."

The man quickly reached for his shirt and Nick continued on his way. He passed through the kitchen and out the swinging doors that led to the dining area. A few people were seated at tables but none of them challenged him. Coming from the kitchen seemed to provide him with the necessary authority.

The interior of the consulate was decorated in bright colors, with murals depicting various events in Coronado's history. One in the process of being repainted depicted three sailing ships at anchor in a small cove—Nick recognized it as the same scene repeated in a simplified form in the seal on the rainbow flag.

Nick spotted a white-haired man in a business suit descending the staircase with a folded flag in his hand. "Pardon me," he said, approaching the man. "Are you Senor Montanya?"

The man frowned at him. "Jose Montanya returned to Coronado three months ago. I am Christopher Onza, the acting envoy."

Nick silently cursed the outdated reference book he'd consulted. He dredged his mind for another name. "I'm sorry, I was mistaken. Leon Oeste, the First Secretary at the Washington embassy, sent me here to pick up the flag you've been flying from the consulate. He said you've been informed and would be expecting me."

"I knew there was to be a change, but my instructions were merely to burn the old flag."

"No, I've been sent to pick it up. Is that it in your hand?"

The man hesitated only an instant. "Yes, I just took it down. Do you wish to give me a receipt for it?"

"Certainly." Nick took a notebook from his pocket and scrawled a few words, signing it with an alias and giving it to Onza. "Here you are. Good evening." He tucked the flag under his arm and headed for the front door.

"You have to sign out," the guard told him at the door.

Nick showed the badge one more time. "Health inspector. I came in through the kitchen."

"I don't care if you came down the chimney. You still have to sign out."

Nick signed out.

That evening in a Times Square hotel room, he delivered the flag

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to Art Schraeder, who smiled as he accepted it. "That was good work, Velvet. Faster than I'd expected." He unfolded the flag until it was fully revealed, spread across one of the twin beds. "It doesn't seem as faded as it should be."

"He told me that was the flag—" Nick began.

"Well, it isn't! This flag is new—it's never been flown anywhere!"

"Does it matter that much?" Nick asked lamely.

"Of course it matters! I hired you to steal a faded flag from the Coronado government, not one of these new ones."

"It looks exactly the same to me—a rainbow background with the nation's official seal in the center."

"I need an old one," Schraeder insisted. "Whoever gave you this tricked you."

Nick had already realized that. The man on the stairs hadn't been the easy mark he appeared to be. By now the flag Schraeder wanted was tucked safely away until morning. "I'll have it for you tomorrow," he assured Schraeder. He tried not to think of what else could go wrong. He especially tried not to think of Sandra Paris.

In the morning he was on upper Madison Avenue before dawn, standing in a doorway next to a homeless man who slept bundled inside a shabby overcoat. Precisely at seven, as the first rays of sun appeared over the East River, the man who had given Nick the wrong flag the previous day appeared at the third-floor window. He unwrapped the halyard from the pole and attached the flag to it, unfurling it as he raised it to the end of the pole.

The flag hung out over the sidewalk at what Nick estimated was an angle of about forty-five degrees. He watched as Christopher Onza finished, then left the doorway and prepared to go into action. During the night he'd arranged to hire a truck with a moveable boom with a bucket at the top, used by an outdoor-advertising firm to change its billboards. He saw it coming up the avenue and waved to the driver. He'd have the flag off the pole before anyone knew what had happened.

"All right," Nick told the driver when the truck pulled up. "Take me up to that flag. When we're close enough I'll take over the controls in the bucket myself."

The driver looked blank. "What flag are you talking about? I don't see any flag."

Nick had a sinking feeling as he turned his head and glanced up

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at the consulate window. The flagpole was empty, its halyard flapping gently in the breeze.

Across the street he noticed that the sleeping man was no longer in the doorway. Only the shabby overcoat remained. Its wearer had vanished as neatly as the flag.

Nick crossed the street and picked up the coat. A small white card fell free of it and he knew what it would say before he bent to pick it up.

*Impossible things before breakfast.*

"I've never seen you so upset, Nicky," Gloria told him as she poured a second cup of coffee.

"Sandra Paris beat me twice in three days. She stole both of those flags from under my nose and I don't even know how she did it. The only flag I managed to steal was the wrong one."

"What did Mr. Schraeder say?"

"I haven't told him yet."

When he took the train back to Manhattan that afternoon, Nick fully expected his meeting with Art Schraeder to be a total disaster. He was prepared for the first real failure in his long career, prepared for the news to travel quickly among the people who were most likely to hire him.

He was not prepared for Schraeder to grant him one more chance. The man listened to his story with a sour expression on his face and finally said, "I would have done better hiring this Sandra Paris, apparently. There is one last opportunity to steal an old flag before they're destroyed at the end of the month, but you'd have to fly to Coronado to do it. What do you think?"

Nick would have traveled to the South Pole to redeem himself at that point. "Where is the flag?"

"In front of the presidential palace in Coronado City. The place is well guarded, of course. Stealing this one will be even harder than stealing the first two."

"Those first two were pretty difficult for me. It can't be any worse in Coronado City."

He arrived there the following Monday morning and took a taxi to the presidential palace. His confidence dwindled when he saw the military guards surrounding the place, and he realized he knew very little about the island nation of Coronado. He picked up a guidebook for tourists and took it along to his hotel room to read. The hotel

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itself was a white-stucco structure of vaguely Spanish architecture, with balconies overlooking the palace across the square. Around the back was a patio lined with palm trees surrounding a large, inviting swimming pool. Nick changed into his trunks and relaxed there while he read the tourist's guide.

The island had been discovered by Columbus on his second voyage, which accounted for the three sailing ships at anchor on the nation's seal—even though, as the book explained, there had really been seventeen ships on that second voyage. The exact point of their anchorage was unknown. Coronado had been a Spanish possession until the late Nineteenth century, when it won its independence. And independent was the right word for Coronado. Nick knew from recent newspaper headlines that both the United States and Cuba were actively courting the tiny nation in an attempt to win rights to a naval base there.

Nick's reading was interrupted by a gentle tap on his shoulder. "It seems we're fated to keep meeting like this," a voice above him said.

He looked up into the pale-blue eyes of Sandra Paris.

She was wearing a one-piece black bathing suit cut fashionably high on her hips—and might have been any young American tourist spending a few days away from the stress of her job. Her smile was both teasing and tempting as she enjoyed the surprise of her sudden appearance.

"What are you doing here?" Nick asked, rising to his feet.

"Can't a working woman relax once in a while?"

"You're not here to relax. You're here to steal another flag."

"My, my! You have a terrible opinion of me, Nick. Let's go for a swim and cool off." Without another word, she dove into the pool.

Nick followed reluctantly, diving deep and then surfacing next to her. "How did you do it?" he asked, treading water. "You were the bum in the doorway, weren't you?"

"Of course. I wanted to reach out and grab your ankle, but I controlled myself."

"Still, you were in the doorway and the flag was on the pole. How did you get it without my seeing anything?"

"The same way I did it in Washington. The same way I'll do it here."

"The flag at the presidential palace is a lot larger, and there are armed guards all over the place."

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"No problem." She did a backflip and disappeared from view.

When she surfaced again, some distance away, Nick swam over to her. "This feuding between us is foolish. In a sense we're both on the same side. Why don't we team up and split the fees?"

Her pale eyes twinkled. "How would we split the flag?"

"You've got two already. Let me have this one."

"My client needs all three."

"What for? They're just like the new ones."

"No, not quite."

"Tell me who you're working for."

"That's against the rules." She swam effortlessly to the ladder and pulled herself up. He followed along and when he reached her side she was toweling droplets of water from her long legs. "But the least I can do is tell you why the flags are important, since your own client obviously hasn't. Want to come up to my room, or would that compromise you?"

"I'll take my chances," he said, as she slipped into a short terry-cloth robe.

She was on the eighth floor, two levels above Nick's own room, with a perfect view across the park to the presidential palace. He settled into a chair by the balcony and watched while she removed two carefully folded flags from her luggage. Both were the familiar rainbow banners of Coronado, but one was clearly faded, with a tattered edge. "This one is from the Washington embassy," she explained. "I bought the other one at a flag shop in Manhattan for comparison." She unfolded the two flags on the bed where Nick could examine them.

"They look alike to me, except for the fading," he said.

"Look at the seal in the middle."

"Three sailing ships at anchor. What's—? Oh, I see what you mean. The shape of the coastline is a little bit different. On the old seal they're in a sort of cove. On the new flag they're just along a shoreline."

"That's it."

"That's what? Why would that make the old flags so important to anyone?"

"Certain factions must want to preserve them. They don't want them burned."

"But flags are printed in full color in most almanacs and dictionaries. Anyone could see the old design without stealing the flag itself."

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"Not in this much detail. That seal would only be a tiny spot o color in reproductions. Even a printed description, 'three sailing ships at anchor,' wouldn't tell the whole story. The ships are stil there. It's the coastline that's changed."

"You may be right," Nick admitted, remembering how the mura on the wall of the New York consulate was being altered when he was there.

"Of course I'm right. There are two factions involved. One factior wants to keep the change secret, so it hired me to steal the remaining three flags. The other faction wants to reveal the change for its own purpose, so it only needs one of the flags."

"What's so important about the shape of the coastline?"

"That I *don't* know," she admitted.

Nick watched her fold the flags and return them to her suitcase "Where's the one from the New York consulate?"

"That's already been delivered to my client."

Her bedside telephone rang and she scooped it up with a quick motion. "Hello. Yes. Yes. I can't talk now. Tomorrow, that's right Bye."

"Your client?" Nick asked as she hung up.

She merely smiled. "I'll have to ask you to leave now. I'm sure we both have a great deal to do."

"I have a feeling I'll see you tomorrow," Nick said as he departed

Nick wandered over to the palace at sundown and watched while the flag was lowered and folded by an honor guard of four soldiers He knew that Sandra would make her move the following morning true to her motto of impossible things before breakfast. If he hoped to steal the flag himself he would have to act first.

He was just starting away from the palace steps when he spotted a familiar face. It was Christopher Onza, the white-haired gentleman he'd encountered on the stairway of the Coronado consulate in New York. "Pardon me, Senor Onza. You may remember that we met in New York last week."

Onza frowned at him for just an instant. "Oh, yes. You were the man collecting flags."

"I received the wrong one from you. I'll have to return it."

"Don't worry about it."

Onza started to continue on his way but Nick said, "I understand the flag was stolen from your consulate the following morning."

"Stolen? I doubt that. It did disappear mysteriously. Apparently

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it came loose from the pole and was blown away by the wind. We replaced it, as we had planned to do anyway." He nodded overpolitely and continued on his way. Nick wondered if it was the missing flag that had brought him to Coronado.

Nick had a number of tasks to carry out before morning and was awake much of the night. At three A.M. he stood on the balcony of his room gazing out at the moonlit square and the palace beyond. He felt good about his plans. This time the White Queen would not be quite so impossible before breakfast.

He arrived at the palace guardhouse well before sunrise, dressed in a colonel's uniform he'd managed to obtain at some expense. An earlier phone call had informed the captain of the guard—convincingly, he hoped—that the President wished a new flag to be flown that day and a colonel would arrive with it before sunrise. The man who met Nick at the door checked his identification and then admitted him. The captain of the guard, a young man with a neat moustache and brooding eyes, took the new flag and produced the old one with some reluctance.

"I understood it was not to be burned until the first of the month," he said.

"You can see how faded it is," Nick told him. "There will be special visitors at the palace today and the President wants everything perfect."

"Certainly." The captain passed over the flag without further question.

Nick returned his salute and left quickly. It had been as simple as that. The palace flag was much larger than those at the embassies, but he knew it would fit in his suitcase for the flight back to New York. The sun was rising beyond the palm trees by the time he completed his walk to the hotel. As he turned and stood for a moment, watching the honor guard march out to raise the new flag, he saw the white puffs of two exploding smoke bombs, quite near the soldiers, and he knew Sandra was at work. You're too late this time, Sandra, he said to himself.

He hurried through the lobby and pressed the elevator button as the few guests and employees who were in the lobby rushed outside to see what was happening. Upstairs, unlocking the door to his room, he stepped inside, tossed the folded flag on the bed, and began to shed his uniform. Then he heard a sound from the bathroom, but before he could turn a harsh voice stopped him. "Stand very still,

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Mr. Velvet. I have a pistol pointed at the back of your spine, and in this country they would award me a medal for shooting you."

Nick recognized the voice at once. It was Christopher Onza.

"Don't I deserve an explanation before you shoot me?" Nick asked, keeping his hands carefully raised.

"Of course. Since I am known to have an interest in the matter of the flags, the captain of the guard telephoned me after he received your call. I told him to give you the flag, and then arranged to be here when you returned. I will kill you, take the flag, and avoid having to pay that foolish woman I hired."

"If you mean Sandra Paris, she's over there risking her life for you right now."

"Life is cheap in these parts. Lie down on the floor, please."

Nick turned instead to face him. "I knew you were the one who hired her."

"Did she tell you?"

"She didn't have to. When I met you in the New York consulate you knew enough to give me a new flag instead of the old one. That told me you were involved in the conspiracy, whatever it was. Sandra still has the flag from Washington, although she told me the New York one has already been delivered. That told me two things—how it was stolen and who hired her."

"You are a clever man, Mr. Velvet."

"She didn't have to deliver the consulate flag to you because you stole it yourself. I first assumed that somehow she had stolen it from the doorway across the street, but actually she was only watching to make certain her device worked properly. It's the same trick stage magicians use to make a small object vanish from their hands. You ran the flag out to the end of the pole with a heavy elastic band attached. Instead of hooking it to the halyard as usual, you merely secured it with tape. After a few minutes, when the pull of the elastic overcame the resistance of the tape, the flag came free and was yanked back down the pole and into the open window. Right into your hands. Of course, the purpose of the charade was in case someone other than Sandra was watching, someone like me, so that it would appear the flag had been stolen."

"You should be a detective rather than a thief, Velvet."

"I've been told that before. How do you know my name?"

"We had a report that you had been hired by a private group with ties to the American government."

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"Oh?" Nick thought about Art Schraeder and decided it was possible.

"Enough talk—lie down on the floor!"

"Don't I have a right to know the flags' big secret? I already know it involves the shape of the coastline on the seal."

Onza seemed surprised. "One more reason why I can't leave you alive. National flags and seals have changed the course of history more than once, and we don't intend to let it happen again. If you remember your Central American history, you know that Nicaragua lost the canal to Panama because the seal of the country showed an active volcano, which frightened members of the American Congress. In Coronado's case, both our seal and flag show three sailing ships from the second voyage of Columbus at anchor in Coronado Bay, a place we have insisted to both the Americans and Cubans is too shallow to serve as a naval base. We now contend that Columbus landed at some uncertain place along the coast rather than in the bay. Our seal has been changed to indicate that, and the flags are being changed, too. Reproductions of the flag are too small to show the critical details, and our government thought all of the flags had been safely replaced, but when it became known that the Americans were after one of them I hired this woman to steal the last three in case before they got to them."

"What does your President think of all this? You're acting without his knowledge, certainly, or you wouldn't have needed to steal the flags. He could have ordered them withdrawn at once."

"Our President—" Onza began. He never finished the sentence. The door burst open and the room was full of uniformed men with automatic weapons pointed at both of them.

Nick was an hour early for his flight back to New York that afternoon. He saw Sandra Paris seated in the private lounge of the airline club and went over to join her. "Returning to New York?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Los Angeles. I heard they found the flag in your room."

Nick nodded glumly. "It was right there on the bed when the security police burst in. At least I'm alive. Your friend Onza was about to kill me."

"He's no friend of mine. He denies now that he ever hired me."

Nick ordered a couple of drinks for them. "How did those smoke bombs of yours work? I saw them go off."

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"They worked fine, and in the confusion I got the flag away fron the honor guard, but when I realized it was a new one I hesitate just long enough for them to capture me. So I figured that if I wa having a failed mission, you might as well join me, so I gave then your room number. I hope you didn't mind."

"It probably saved my life, even if it did cost me my twenty-five thousand-dollar fee."

"Onza says you were working indirectly for the American gov ernment."

"I guess so. I didn't know it until he told me. Apparently the wanted a flag to use as evidence of that harbor. Onza was acting o his own, without the President's knowledge, which is why he ha to hire you to steal the flags rather than simply take them himself I suspect he was working out his own deal with Cuba for a nava base, and perhaps even planning a coup. He had to remove the flag before they fell into the wrong hands, and before the Presiden learned of his special interest in them."

"Did Onza tell you how we stole the flag in New York?"

"Yes, but how did you work the theft in Washington? Was Leo Oeste an accomplice, too?"

"No." She sipped her drink and smiled at him. "I hired an embass maid to cut through the halyard in two places and glue the rop ends lightly together. The weight of the flag pulled them apart afte a few minutes and the flag simply fell to the sidewalk. I picked i up and walked away. I was a newsboy that morning and the fla went into my sack of papers. You didn't see me."

"I saw you, but I didn't recognize you."

She glanced at her watch. "My flight should be boarding." She stood, gathering up her things, and smiled at Nick. "It's been fun."

He walked her to the gate and watched the plane. Once it was of the ground, he sent a telegram to her at the Los Angeles airport to be delivered on her arrival:

SANDRA: I ONLY NEEDED ONE FLAG SO I REMOVED THE WASHINGTON ONE FROM YOUR SUITCASE LAST NIGHT WHILE YOU SLEPT. CLIMBING UP TWO STORIES TO YOUR BALCONY WASN'T EASY BUT IT WAS WORTH IT TO SEE YOU SO PEACEFULLY ASLEEP IN THE MOONLIGHT. NICK.

"Q"

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## DETECTIVERSE

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*by BONNIE RYAN-FISHER*

he thing about a life of crime
that it seldom pays—
ou put in *hours* overtime—
ut do you get a raise?

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*y JAMES NEILL NORTHE*

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With purses swinging free—
Just imagine his surprise
When the old lady was a he.

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engraver of noteworthy skills
graded some ten-dollar bills.
ough finer than mint,
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*"I don't know what you did," one of Jean's co-workers commented, "but you've certainly got that man's attention . . ."*

# A SLIGHTLY LESS DANGEROUS INSANITY

**by CARL MARTIN**

Jean Brophy couldn't say exactly when Steve Collins had begu to frighten her. She only knew that he did, and her fear increase with every passing day, hour, and minute. What had started as a innocent flirtation, followed by a couple of pleasant dates, ha quickly escalated into a nightmare.

He had seemed nice enough at first, even charming. He made a great first impression. After they had gone out together once, h had sent her flowers every day at work. Each evening when she go home from the office, the phone would be ringing. He kept her o the line as long as she was willing to talk.

Handsome professional men who were also single were scarce i Bradleyville. It was unusual to have one relocate in Bradleyvill from Pittsburg, as he had done. She had been flattered by his at tention and the open envy many of her friends expressed.

"I don't know what you did, but you've certainly got that man' attention," one of her co-workers commented.

Jean didn't know what she had done, either, but she was enjoyin being pursued.

As they stood at the entrance to her apartment building at th end of their second date, he asked her to marry him. She laughe and gave him a playful push. She thought he was joking, but sh should have realized he was serious. There was something a bit to intense about him even then.

The flowers continued to arrive, and he started to call her durin working hours, too. He wanted to hear her voice. He said he wante to take her to lunch. He told her he loved her and repeated hi marriage proposal. Jean began to find this sudden ardor a bit dis

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concerting, so she didn't encourage him. However, she did nothing to discourage him, either.

A couple of days after their second date, she had to work late. One of the men in the office drove her home and dropped her off in front of her apartment building. Steve was sitting on the steps waiting for her.

Speaking past clenched teeth, he demanded to know where she had been. And who was the man who had just driven away? Who was she seeing behind his back?

Jean told him she had been working.

He called her a liar. "When I couldn't reach you at home, I tried you at the office. No one answered."

Patiently, Jean explained that the switchboard was closed after five-thirty. No one was there to take incoming calls.

He listened, but for all the effect it had she might have been speaking Chinese. When she finished, he swore, called her a string of vile names, and again accused her of cheating on him. He paced back and forth, swinging his arms in short, choppy motions, but his voice never rose above a conversational level. To anyone watching from a distance, they might have been discussing sports or the weather. His anger seemed cold and controlled, not the product of hot-blooded, emotional irrationality, and this made it all the more terrifying.

Jean had the key to the outside door in her hand. When his back was turned momentarily, she used it, shutting the door firmly behind her. He rushed forward, yanked on the handle, then stood glaring at her through the heavy glass panel. She ran to the elevator without looking back.

When she reached her apartment, Jean took the phone off the hook. She went to bed, but sleep eluded her for hours. She kept playing the horrible scene over in her mind. He must be crazy, she thought, but it gave her no comfort.

The next morning he called her at work, full of apology and remorse. He didn't know what had gotten into him. He begged her forgiveness. "It'll never happen again," he promised.

Jean let him talk, then told him she didn't want to see him again. She was polite but firm.

When he called back, she rejected the call. When his flowers arrived, she refused delivery. And when he tried to reach her at home, she hung up on him. He would eventually get the message, she

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figured. But she was wrong. Even after the switchboard operator at work learned to recognize his voice and stopped putting his calls through, he continued to call her at home. Sometimes he seemed rational. Other times his voice was high and shrill. She always hung up on him.

Finally, after an evening when he called every half hour all night long, she had her number changed. The lull lasted only three days. Then he somehow obtained her new number and began calling again. Only now he didn't talk. He listened. It was as though he was satisfied to merely hear the agitation in her voice when she answered.

One evening she noticed his car parked across the street when she left work. He followed her home. When she looked out her window hours later, he was still parked down the block.

After that, she watched for him and seemed to see him at every turn. He followed her everywhere. He was outside her building when she left in the morning. When she went to a restaurant or supermarket, he often followed her inside. If she visited a friend, he waited until she came out and fell in behind her again. He didn't approach her or try to talk to her, but he made certain she knew he was there.

Jean couldn't stand being followed. In desperation, she finally called the police. Maybe he would listen to them and be convinced she really didn't want to see him again.

Steve was parked down the block from her front door when the squad car arrived. He was still there when the two officers left after hearing her story. Jean watched from her window as the policemen invited Steve out of his car to question him.

They stood talking for a long time. At first the officers' bearing was stiff and erect, but after a while their posture relaxed and they looked like three old friends chatting. Then the two cops walked back to her building.

She pushed the buzzer to let them in.

"He doesn't seem like a bad guy," one of the men said.

"He just wants you to give him a chance," the other added.

"That's right—he won't hurt you. The poor guy's in love."

"He hasn't broken any laws, and I don't think he will. After all, the man's a lawyer. He's even donated some of his time to the Police Benevolent Association."

It was clear that Steve's genius for making good first impressions had worked again and they viewed her as the irrational one. The only question in their minds was what a nice guy like Steve saw in

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her. When they left, Jean felt completely discouraged. The only course open to her was to try to talk to him again, though she doubted it would do any good. He had already refused to listen to reason and what he was doing defied logic.

The next time she saw him behind her on the street, she turned around and walked toward him. If she was going to confront him, she wanted to do it with other people around.

Steve looked at her in surprise, then crossed to the other side of the street. He had told the police he was in love, but that didn't seem like the act of a man who wanted to patch things up. Whatever this had been in the beginning, it had evolved into something quite different.

Jean reminded herself that he had broken no laws and hadn't tried to hurt her. It was small comfort, but all she had. That evening when she returned to her apartment, even that little consolation disappeared.

Her tiny apartment was a shambles. Someone had vandalized it so thoroughly that everything she owned had been destroyed. Someone had sprayed acid on everything—walls, floors, furniture. Her TV and VCR both had had acid poured into them and were beyond repair. Holes had been eaten through all her clothing. Nothing had survived.

She had no doubt who that someone was. She called the police again, but all she received was sympathy. She had no proof.

She had to help herself, she knew that now. His actions had become increasingly more outrageous. If she didn't do something to stop him, there was no telling what he might do the next time. He was out of control and she doubted whether even he knew where this was going.

She moved to an inexpensive hotel, but she didn't get much sleep. She went over everything she knew about the man, which wasn't much. He had come to Bradleyville from Pittsburg. He had no close friends or relatives in Bradleyville. That was it.

She didn't know why he had left Pittsburg, but it didn't matter. She could guess. He had probably decided to leave after doing something so scandalous that he had shattered the false image he projected. His image and reputation were important to him, otherwise he wouldn't work so hard at maintaining them. The significant thing was that he had left Pittsburg and would leave Bradleyville, too, once he was found out.

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But could she afford to wait? Did she want to risk whatever new outrage might occur to him?

She thought of buying a pistol for protection, but rejected the idea. That would be really crazy. But maybe, just maybe, some slightly less dangerous insanity was needed.

Steve Collins hurried toward his car. He was sure this was going to be a good day. He had learned where Jean had moved to after he had trashed her apartment. He wanted to see the expression on her face when she saw him waiting outside.

As he neared his car, he saw a sheet of white paper under the windshield wiper on the driver's side. Then he noticed similar sheets were on most of the other cars on the street. It must be an advertisement of some kind, he thought as he removed it. Then he saw that the top half of the page was filled with a picture of himself. He read:

*The man you are looking at is Steven Collins. He is a known sex offender who has come here from Pittsburg. His doctors think he has been cured, but he has not. I'm sure of this, but I can't prove it. I can't allow him to victimize my friends and neighbors, either. Remember his name and his face. Question your children. He may have already approached them. BE ON GUARD!*

Steve Collins forgot all about Jean Brophy. He had another problem on his mind. How long would it take him to pack up his things and leave Bradleyville?

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**a *NEW* short story by**

**CARLETON CARPENTER**

*"Maybe we could have Ricky Rhinestone play Lillian Russell," Moses Lightcastle told the studio chief.*

*Bingham's face purpled up in fine fashion. "The way things is going today, that ain't so far out as you think. Jeezus, I wish Alice Faye was thirty years younger. She could do the remake. Where the hell are the Alice Fayes? They don't make Alice Fayes no more. They make Ricky Rhinestones and all the rest of them dopers. Hash, horse, ludes, coke—this whole town's nothing but a giant pharmacy. It used to be an orange grove . . . !"*

# A PART IN THE PICTURE

***by CARLETON CARPENTER***

"To begin with," Gustave Bingham began, "Cleo don't sing." He stabbed the glowing end of a well chewed cigar in the general direction of the youngish man seated across the desk from him, emphasizing the point.

The young man recoiled. Mentally. He was in no way threatened by the bayonet thrust of the stogy. There was an acre or two of highly polished mahogany between the men. He recrossed his long legs, managing somehow to leave the sharp crease in his grey flannels undisturbed. The permanent half smile beneath his steel-rimmed glasses wavered not a jot. The thick lenses successfully hid the contempt in the pale eyes behind them.

Moses Lightcastle loathed his boss. It was a terrific, wildly pulsating loathing, a thing to nourish and cherish—the dominant force in his life, not only sustaining him on a day-to-day basis, but prodding him on to impossible highs as well as unplumbed hidden reserves of delicious deviousness. A hatred running so deep it was

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really the ultimate love affair. The Lightcastle Loathing. And with it, he thrived.

"Not a note?" he asked coolly.

Bingham plugged the cigar back into its juicy thick-lipped socket and gave his imitation of a chuckle—a noise constructed unequally of rale, wheeze, and choke. "In a moment of weakness, I thought she did. Retake that. In a moment of strenth, I shoulda said. Great strenth." (No "g.") "We were hammering away and she come out with these little musiclike sounds, you know? I thought she was sing-prone, but on recession I think I just hit a lost chord or something she didn't know she lost. Or should I say mislaid?"

Inside the impeccable blue blazer, Moses squirmed. Oh, Edwin, are you listening? Are you taking this down? Edwin Newman was one of his personal gods.

"We gotta get another broad for the part." Bingham cradled the Havana in the Steuben ashtray and assumed what Lightcastle termed "that quasi-executive look."

"Perhaps if we hired a pianist and she auditioned—" Moses began.

"I did. She did. Last week. Right here." He waved at the Baldwin concert grand in the south forty of the immense office. "She bombed. Made Tony Randall sound like Ol' Blue Eyes. Cleo don't do-re-mi. No pitch, the key-clubber said. And unexpected timing. You had to be here to believe."

"I had the week off."

"Yeah. What do you do for a whole week in La Jolla?"

"I body-surf."

"Oh." Bingham never understood the prissy bum. But the sonofabee had taste. He needed the bum's brain. Sometimes you just gotta put up with.

His hand slid toward the front tail of his raucously printed sportshirt and tapped the truss beneath it. Sometimes you just gotta put up with.

Why doesn't he have that hunk of herniated gut tucked back in and sewn up? Moses thought. And why did Moses let it bother him? Everybody had weird quirks and unconscious personal habits. The ring twisters, the nose tweakers, the truss patters, the leg crossers.

Lightcastle uncrossed his legs.

Better than other mannerisms he could think of. Like specialties. David was head of the public-relations staff at the studio. Moses didn't dislike Bixby, but it was difficult, at best, conversing with someone whose hand was either patting the sparse blond hair on his

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rapidly balding head or patting the parts below, presumably to make certain they weren't receding as well. "Couldn't we get someone to dub for Miss Osprey?" Moses suggested.

Gustave replugged and turned the Havana's light back on. "Cleo wouldn't lie still for it. Class she ain't. Stubborn she is. No, we gotta sign ourselves another Jenny Wren."

"Lind."

"Whatever. Damned shame, too. Cleo's a good little actress."

Moses cleared his throat. Little? Good lord, Cleo Osprey was nearly as tall as he was and had shoulders above her ample chest any Rams linebacker would be proud to put pads on. Classy she wasn't. Little she wasn't. "Couldn't you try to convince her the part—?"

"Son, you don't understand." (Lightcastle really hated it when Bingham called him "son.") "It ain't like the old days when you had a whole stableful all under contract. They did what they were told, no back talk. They reported to the set and took their orders like good soldiers. Today it's a whole new war. And I got no troops. Today they've all gone independent. Every damn one of 'em's a corpafrigginration! The lawyers is running the world and screwing everything up—the picture business and me likewise. I got that one rock star under contract and that's it. Skinny little shrieker. Nothing to him but a ton of makeup and a carload of curls." Bingham sighed his corporate-sized sigh. "But the freak sells tickets and records by the trillion. Sometimes you just gotta put up with."

Moses added a tad to his half smile. "Maybe we could have Ricky Rhinestone play Lillian Russell."

"The way things is going today, that ain't so far out as you think. Jeezus, I wish Alice Faye was thirty years younger. She could do the remake. Where the hell are the Alice Fayes? They don't make Alice Fayes no more. They make Ricky Rhinestones and all the rest of them dopers. Hash, horse, ludes, coke—this whole town's nothing but a giant pharmacy. It used to be an orange grove!" Lightcastle watched Bingham's massive face purple up in fine fashion. His boss was warming to a familiar diatribe.

A rude buzz cut the sermon midmount.

Gustave grabbed the phone receiver and barked something only Miss Kathy, his secretary, could interpret as hello.

After a moment, during which his facial hue slowly returned to its normal murk, he said: "Then please send them in, Miss Kathy." As far as Moses knew, the only person in the world Bingham was polite to was the wraithlike relic in his outer office.

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The towering oak door eased open, pushed by the fragile hand of Miss Kathy. A mysterious feat unto itself. Bingham's ancient aide couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds wearing deep-sea diving boots. A regular road-company Estelle Winwood.

"Please go right in," she chirped. Her British voice tinkled clearly across the miles of high-pile carpeting before the heavy door closed silently behind David Bixby, Bingham's public-relations chief, and a stunningly beautiful brunette.

Bingham, near-sighted—20/40 at least—sprang to his feet. Moses Lightcastle unfolded from his chair—and as the couple drew within the range of his limited vision, his permanent half smile faded. The luscious brunette was the same young lady whose warm bed he had left less than fourteen hours earlier.

If the scene were being filmed, the camera would zoom in to an extreme closeup of Lightcastle's face and reveal, beneath the forced calm tightly stretched across his features, the war raging within the man.

Tiny bits of the battle showed through the pale eyes, but they were diffused and hidden from the others by the thick lenses of the glasses he wore.

Introductions were being made. Moses fought to focus on the moment at hand, but his mind kept dissolving back to the night before.

Now the beautiful brunette was smiling at him—as if he were a complete stranger. And offering her hand, for godsake! He was losing the fight—the dissolve was taking over. A voice—was it Bixby's?—sounded hollow and distant as it said, "I want you to meet Dannelle Driscoll."

*Dannelle?* What happened to Betty?

And the dissolve to flashback was complete.

"Hello." The brunette was smiling as she swiveled the bar stool around to face him. "I'm Betty. Not overly liberated or anything—I simply feel it's foolish to waste time being reticent and coy when one could be happily conversing."

"I agree." Moses returned the smile and self-consciously adjusted the steel-rims. "My name's Moses."

"I know. I heard the bartender before." She crossed fantasy-length legs. "You come here a lot?"

"When I can. Not as often as I'd like."

Her eyes were friendly—dark and direct. "Afraid of sharks?"

"Are you a shark?" His half smile slid into place.

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"I hope not." Her laugh was full and dead-ahead. "I mean all the hoopla about the shark scare this afternoon."

"Happens once in a while here at Emerald Bay. For the most part, I don't believe them."

"Cleared the cove," she said. "Cut your body-surfing session short."

"You saw me?"

"Umm." She grinned and lifted her Dewars-on-the-rocks.

"I didn't see you."

"You weren't wearing your glasses."

"I am now. Would you like another Scotch?"

"I wouldn't say no." Their eyes locked, stocked, and barreled.

"Nor would I," said Moses. He knew the pickup had been completed but wasn't exactly sure how much of a hand he had had in it.

Now her hand was in his—firm and friendly but totally a stranger's. This lady was good. The complete actress.

"You're meeting the new Lillian Russell," David Bixby was telling them as he sneaked a minor adjustment and then smoothed the already smooth blond sparseness.

Moses watched the woman with renewed fascination.

No thirty ways about it, Gustave Bingham was bowled over. Dannelle Driscoll had scored three strikes in a row with him. His cigar sat forgotten in the Steuben as his hard-poached eyes watched her, agoggle. "How's the singing?" he asked, husky, hoarse, and subtle as a bus wreck.

"Incredible!" Bixby chimed in like a regular William Morris.

"Wasn't Lillian Russell a blonde?" Dannelle/Betty asked quietly.

"Who cares?" gurgled the gone Bingham. "Who remembers?"

"And—heavier?" Dannelle's hands were on the slim hips aimed squarely at Bingham.

"So now she's skinnier." Gustave sprang back to life. "What're ya trying to do? Talk me out of ya? The part's yours. I made up my mind. Now don't unmake me. Who's your agent? Call him and tell him we got us a new star if he makes me the right deal. What I ain't got is all the money in the world, like Bank Americard."

"I don't have an agent, Mr. Bingham. I make my own deals."

Moses watched for a tiny look in his direction from her. It didn't come.

"Bixby—" Bingham picked up the dead cigar and poked it at him "—where'd you find her? How long have—? Why didn't you—? Have you been holding out on me?"

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"G.B.," David beamed, "I brought her here to you, didn't I? I'm a company man, you know that. Dannelle's an old friend. You needed a new Russell, I brought her to you."

"Yeah, yeah. Okay, company man, clear out now. You, too, Lightcastle."

"Should I arrange the test?" Moses asked.

"Test, shmest! Waste of film stock! I'm made up. Now clear out. This lady and me's got a deal to digress!"

Moses followed Bixby to the door. Before pulling the door shut behind him, he looked quickly back to the desk.

Betty's back was solidly to him. There had been no gesture. No look. Nothing.

"Hey, Mr. Johnson! That's fantastic! You merge with a bigger agency or something?" Bucky could almost taste his big break exploding at last.

"Even better," Johnson said. "I've quit the agency business."

Serving up the overgenerous Chivas Regal, Bucky's smile slid sideways but quickly recovered.

"Flesh-peddling's no job for a gentleman," Johnson explained, sipping deeply. "Who needs that crap?"

"Right," said Bucky, desperately trying to hold onto his grin.

"A lot of hard creative work for a bunch of hard unappreciative no-talents. What's the percentage?"

Ten off the top, Bucky told himself. "Right, Mr. J.," he said.

"As of today," Johnson was saying, "I'm a studio man."

"Fantastic!" Bucky's eternal hope-spring nearly busted.

"Nothing big," Johnson said.

"Fantastic!" Bucky repeated. He leaned across the bar. "The Chevas is on me, babe. Congratulations!"

The following morning at eleven—practically the middle of the night for him—Ricky Rhinestone whooshed, unannounced, through Bingham's oak door, planting his long thin legs firmly into the deep carpet. "How dare you!" he screamed.

Gustave looked up wearily from the contract on the desk in front of him. "Rickela baby." He spread open hands at the apparition across from him. "What have I done now?" Fatherly, like Flanagan.

"That's my part!" Ricky shrieked.

"What part?" Bingham asked calmly.

"Lillian Russell, that's what part! I thought you bought that prop-

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erty from Fox for me. It would be the sensation of the century. Rhinestone as Russell! We'd all clean up. You, the studio, the banks, me. Those old numbers of hers are perfect for me. It could turn my image completely around. From punk rock to purest crystal camp. Platinum album! Can't you see it, for crissakes? Can't you for once see farther than the end of that filthy cigar?" Rhinestone quivered with absolute fury.

"What are you on?" Bingham asked, blinking.

"I'll tell you what *you're* on, Buster. Borrowed time!"

Bingham let a loose smile curl up the lambchop lips. "You gotta be high as Wilt Chamberlain's armpits to stand there yelling at me because I don't picture you as Lillian Russell. Alice Faye you ain't!"

With that, Ricky Rhinestone burst forth with a full-throated chorus of "After the Ball Is Over."

Gus Bingham sat there at his desk, staring stonily at the rock star, mesmerized as a cobra frozen by a flute. *Honestly* entranced. Jeezus, he thought, the kid's terrific. Have I goofed again? Was I too hasty signing whatsername yesterday? He really is sensational! If the public would accept—godamighty, what an incredible idea! I can see it now. Put him in a skirt with a big bustle, stick a big stick in his hand—

Cleo Osprey, lounging on the nine-foot down-pillowed sofa in the den of her hideaway high above the Sunset Strip and sipping a virgin mary, read the announcement in *Hollywood Reporter*. She gagged on the drink, hurled the glass into the fireplace—smashing it against the cast-iron logs with the gas jets—threw the *Reporter* toward the opposite side of the room, and scooped up the princess telephone.

The phone trembled as she furiously push-buttoned the private number, stabbing a fake fingernail clear off. The oath that followed was loud, inventive, and sailorworthy.

As soon as the number stopped ringing and the receiver was lifted, before a "hello" even, Cleo spoke. Her naturally low-pitched voice assumed basso profundo proportions. "Okay, Gussie," she said, "you undersized overtrussed turkey, what's all this about some floozie named Dannelle Driscoll!"

The following evening, a little before six, the body was discovered by one of the new studio guards just prior to shift change. He left it undisturbed where it lay, on the bare floor of the empty sound

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stage, and walked the short distance to the front gate to report the crime.

The L.A.P.D. called and crews dispatched, the guard quickly returned and posted himself just outside Stage Two. He had happily volunteered to stay on duty at double time. If he had to stay, with a little luck, beyond midnight, he would earn triple. He smiled in spite of himself. Everyone was entitled to his cut, right?

He shivered in the late-day heat.

Shortly before midnight, Inspector Seward, that quizzical little bald-headed gnome of the Los Angeles Police, had gathered together quite a group. They had arranged themselves in a loose semicircle in front of Gustave Bingham's immense desk, at which the Inspector now sat. He looked from one face to the next, referring to the scraps of paper he held with names and notations he had made during individual and private questioning.

Moses Lightcastle, Bingham's right-hand man. David Bixby, his press agent. Cleo Osprey, his—as Seward had delicately scribbled—lady friend. Ricky Rhinestone, his star moneymaker. Katherine Primscott, his personal secretary. And Gustave Bingham himself, who had insisted—uncharacteristically, Seward guessed—that Seward use his chair.

Dannelle Driscoll, nee Betty Dysart, the right-on lady, was missing from the group. At this moment she was in a drawer at the city morgue. No longer dead-ahead—just dead, with a tag hanging from a pretty toe.

Seward scanned his notes again, scrubbing his thumb and index finger on the slight whisker-stubble of his chin. They presented a formidable picture—full, juicy, but incomplete. Something, some one ingredient, was missing. Each of them, in his or her own way, had managed to incriminate another. Like a round sung at summer camp, once started it was hard to conclude. There were motives galore—all hinging, one way or another, on the remake of *Lillian Russell.*

Cleo Osprey and Rhinestone both wanted the role that the deceased had been signed to portray. Cleo, tall as the victim and probably stronger, could easily have struck the lethal blows delivered with the murder instrument—a heavy brace, normally used to secure the set backing to the stage floor, found beside the body and wiped clean of prints and probably blood and skin tissue. Miss Primscott, who looked too frail to hold a full cup of tea, could have wielded

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the weapon, considering the way she managed heavy oak doors. Bingham and she obviously had some special rapport. And it was fairly well established that some kind of dalliance—Inspector Seward's translation—had occurred in this office just prior to the contract-signing on Monday between Dannelle and Bingham. Bingham had admitted to Seward that his secretary had been in love with him for years. Even setting Bingham's giant ego aside, there was probably some truth in it.

Rhinestone had said that Bingham admitted making a mistake in signing Driscoll too soon, and that there was no way to break a very expensive contract. Again more ego—but, again, another possible motive.

Moses Lightcastle had volunteered to Seward the fact of his meeting on Sunday in La Jolla with Betty/Dannelle. Why would he want to incriminate himself? Who would have known? Was he making points for himself in case some bellhop or barkeep should turn up later to incriminate him? His hatred for Bingham was thick enough to cut with an overripe zucchini, although the trim gentleman did his utmost to conceal it. Another massive ego. But so badly bruised it had moved the self-composed executive assistant to sudden murder?

Then there was this bundle of energy with the quick smile and sparse blond hair, David Bixby. He had brought Dannelle to Bingham—and had been fingered by at least three others in the group as the lover, or at least former lover, of the deceased. However, during his private interrogation of Bixby, Seward discovered that had nothing to do with the price of eggs. Dannelle had been the child bride of Bixby. The alimony payments had been crushing him for years now and they had, Seward learned, come to an agreement: if Bixby could sell her to Bingham, she'd cancel all future payments due and wipe clean the past-due slate as well. Had she reneged on her promise? And had Bixby overreacted?

A pounding on the oak door roused Seward from his notes.

"What's going on out there?" he asked, as one of his men pushed open the door.

"Excuse me, Inspector," the sergeant said, "but this guard here wonders if you're finished with him now?"

All eyes were on the door to Miss Kathy's office.

"I believe I am," Seward said.

"Thank you." The guard who had discovered the body appeared

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briefly in the door frame. He looked tired but pleased. He was on triple time. He nodded to the Inspector and turned to leave.

"But that's Jeff Johnson—" David Bixby started. "He used to be Dannelle's agent."

"I still am!" Johnson cried, trying to wrench himself free of the sergeant's sudden grasp. "I got a signed contract!"

"Better bring him in here," Seward said quietly.

"I've got my rights!" the ex-agent shouted. "She was dealing herself! Dealing me out! That isn't done! I have my rights!"

"And now," Seward said, "you have some more. Read them to him, Sergeant."

## DETECTIVERSE

*THE KIDNAPER'S THREAT*

*by JANET BLAIR DOMINICK*

"If Pop don't come across with dough
Or if he interferes,
I'll send him first a thumb or two
And then I'll box your ears!"

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a *NEW* Inspector Ghote story by

**H. R. F. KEATING**

*"No this, no that," complained the Assistant Commissioner crossly. "What good are your nos and woes to me, Inspector? It is results I am wanting. A most valuable statue of Goddess Parvati was stolen in broad daylight, and numerous artefacts also."*

*"Artefacts, sir?" Ghote blurted the question out before he had time to see it would be a mistake to display ignorance of exactly what the English word meant.*

*"Yes, man, artefacts. Artefacts. Whatsoever they are."*

*A story in Harry Keating's enduring series that will make you laugh out loud. Would that Peter Sellers were alive to play any or all of the characters, excepting Marik but including Professor Mrs. or Miss Prunella Partington . . .*

# THE PURLOINED PARVATI AND OTHER ARTEFACTS

***by H. R. F. KEATING***

The Assistant Commissioner was angry. Inspector Ghote could be in no doubt of it. That voice, he thought, so loud it must be heard through entire Bombay.

The A.C.P. had thumped the glass-topped surface of his desk, too.

"It is not good enough. Not good enough by one damn long chalk."

"No, sir. No, A.C.P. sahib."

"The clear-up rate for Crime Branch has fallen almost to zero."

Ghote thought of stating the exact figure, which, if it was somewhat down on the year before, was still well above that zero. But he realized that doing so would hardly calm the A.C.P.'s wrath. In fact, it might have the very opposite effect.

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"Yes, sir," he said.

"And you, Ghote, are as much responsible as any. More even. More."

Again Ghote was aware of a lack of precise factuality in the A.C.P.'s charge. But this time he did not even produce a word in acknowledgment.

"Look at the business of the Gudalpore Temple theft," the A.C.P. stormed on, as unappeased by silence as he had been by sycophantic agreement. "How long is it since we were receiving that tipoff that the loot was held in Bombay for inspection by some damn unscrupulous foreign buyers? Two months? Three months? Four?"

Once more Ghote decided that silence was best. But it was not.

"How long? I am asking you, Inspector. How long? Three months, four?"

"It is seven weeks, three days, A.C.P. sahib."

"Exactly. Seven weeks, eight, and what results have you succeeded to get?"

"Sir, it is not at all easy. We have had no more than that one tipoff itself. No hint even of where the loot may be hidden. No reports of any suspicious foreigners coming to camp in Bombay."

"No this, no that. What good are your nos and woes to me, Inspector? It is results I am wanting. A most valuable statue of Goddess Parvati was stolen in broad daylight, and numerous artefacts also."

"Artefacts, sir?"

Ghote blurted the question out before he had had time to see it would be a mistake to display ignorance of what exactly the English word meant.

"Yes, man, artefacts. Artefacts. Whatsoever they are."

The A.C.P. snatched the metal paperweight inscribed with his initials off a formidable pile of documents to one side of his desk and began a scrabbling hunt through them. At last he produced a long list, badly reproduced on mauvish paper, and slammed the paperweight back before the breeze from the big fan behind him could play havoc with the pile.

He began reading aloud.

"One Goddess Parvati, Tenth–Twelfth Century, sandstone, height one hundred and forty-seven centimeters, seated upon a representation of a *tipai* in the semi-lotus position with the left arm resting upon the knee and the right in an attitude of blessing. Plus four God Ganeshas, terracotta, height twenty-two centimeters, twenty-three centimeters, twenty-five centimeters, and twenty-eight centimeters

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respectively. Plus one Goddess Sarasvati, bronze, twelve centimeters, tail of peacock partly missing. Plus two Krishnas, fluting, no heights stated. Plus eighteen other artefacts, various."

He looked up.

"Eighteen artefacts, Ghote, and you have not been able to locate even one."

"No, sir."

"Well, it is not good—"

The A.C.P.'s observations were interrupted by the shrilling of one of the three telephones on his wide-spreading desk. He picked it up.

*"Haan?"*

An urgent voice squeaked out.

"No," the A.C.P. barked back. "No, I am not able to see. Every damn foreigner coming here has some letter of introduction from a Minister and thinks they can bother me with their every least wish. I have appointment. Lions Club luncheon. One hundred percent important."

He slammed the phone down.

"Ghote," he said, his voice much less furious than it had been a minute earlier, "there is some Professor Something-or-other wanting to make some complaint or protest or demand. Deal with it, yes?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, A.C.P. sahib. Right away, sir." Ghote clicked heels smartly and left, buoyed up with relief at the unforeseen rescue.

Fate, it soon began to seem, was to be yet kinder to him. The foreign professor—who turned out to his surprise to be not the venerable man he had envisaged but an English lady, stout of person, red of face, bristly of eyebrow, and clad in skirt and jacket of some tough pale-brown material resembling the sail of a harbor dhow—had no sooner announced herself as "Professor Prunella Partington, good day to you" than she stated in a ringingly British voice that she had just seen in Bombay "a Parvati statue that ought quite certainly to be in its proper place in the temple at Gudalpore."

Ghote could hardly believe his ears. Was this lady actually speaking about the very statue of Goddess Parvati, 147 centimeters in height, stolen from the Gudalpore Temple and hidden ever since somewhere in Bombay awaiting a foreign buyer? The very idol, together with other artefacts, that he had just been rebuked by the A.C.P. for not having located?

"Madam," he said, his heart thumping in confusion, "what, please, is the height of said statue?"

"Height? Height? How the devil should I know?"

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"But you have stated that you have just only seen same, madam," said Ghote.

"'Course I have. Wouldn't come round to Police Headquarters fast as I could, would I, unless I had?"

"But, then, the height of same?"

"Oh, I suppose about five feet. Far as I remember when I examined it at Gudalpore ten years ago. Statue of Parvati, seated on a stool in the semi-lotus position. Sandstone."

"Madam, this is sounding altogether like one idol stolen from that same temple seven–eight weeks back, together with other art—art—other objects, madam."

"Of course it's been stolen from Gudalpore, and someone had better come along pronto and arrest the fellow who stole it."

"You are knowing who it is? Please, kindly state where he is to be found."

"In that appalling sham museum of his, of course," she said. "Where else?"

"But, madam, you are altogether failing to name that appalling sham museum."

"Nonsense, my good chap. 'Course I named it. Look, here's the place's piffling brochure."

From her large leather handbag, stoutly clasped, the professor—was she Professor Mrs. or Professor Miss Prunella, Ghote wondered—produced a slim pamphlet printed in a shade of deep pink.

Ghote read.

"Hrishikesh Agnihotri Museum of Indology. This Museum is serving the nation for the past two and a half decades, playing an important role by displaying classical, traditional, and also folk arts to fulfil aesthetic, scientific, and practical aims. It is containing different specimens in various fields, viz. Physics, Chemistry, Botany, Chiromancy, Phonology, Anthropology, and Archaeology. The Museum may also organize from time to time seminars, lecture series, conferences, and meetings for research and study on Mythology, Tantra, Yantra, Mantra, Astro-Geomancy, Physiognamy, Paleontology, Gemology, Alchemy, and several other arts and sciences originating in India in ancient and medieval times. Founded by Shri Hrishikesh Agnihotri, Chairman of the Board of Trustees. Shri Hrishikesh Agnihotri."

He looked up at the burly form of the British professor. "But this is sounding cent per cent *pukka*," he said, much impressed by all the -ologies and -ancies. "It is seeming not at all of sham."

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"Poppycock, my good man. Poppycock. A hodgepodge like that? Fellow must be an utter charlatan. You'll think so pretty quick when you see him. Come on."

"But, madam," Ghote said, still reserving judgment, "in any case it is not possible at once to come on. If your detailed description of the idol of Parvati is correct, I am admitting there is prima facie case against one Mr. Hrishikesh Agnihotri. But if I am to nab the gentleman, certain procedures must be followed."

"And in the meantime the fellow will take to his heels, accompanied by that dreadful dumb brute he keeps about the place."

"There is another miscreant also?"

"I should jolly well say there is. Just as I'd spotted the Gudalpore Parvati, this hulking creature came out of a little door just behind it. Well, I'd seen quite enough anyhow, so I simply came straight round here. I've got a letter from your Minister for Health, Family Planning, Jails, and the Arts, you know."

"Yes, yes, madam. And I am promising fullest cooperation itself. But, kindly understand, under Criminal Procedure Code it is necessary to have any arrest witnessed by two *panches*, as we are calling them."

"Independent evidence, eh?" The professor drew her bristly eyebrows together in thought for a moment. Then she brightened. "Got just the chap for you," she said. "Possibly two. You could call him an expert on Indian art. Staying at my hotel, as it happens. Name of Edgar Poe."

Ghote felt a faint stirring at the back of his mind.

"Edgar Poe?" he asked. "It is the gentleman who is writing the famous story of The Pit and the Pendulum?"

"Good God, no, man. Edgar Allan Poe must have been dead over a hundred years. This chap's another kettle of fish. Dealer in antiques. As a matter of fact, it was because of him that I went to that appalling museum at all. Heard him talking to an Indian friend over breakfast this morning. Sitting at the next table. Mentioned the place, and I thought it might be worth a quick look-see. Suppose it was, in a way, since I spotted the Gudalpore Parvati. But Mr. Poe and his friend would make first-class what-d'you-call-'ems—pinches."

"Madam, it is *panches*. *Panches*."

"Never mind. The thing is, we could be round there in ten minutes if you get a move on, pick them up, and get over to that place."

"No, madam, no. I am thinking that it is not altogether a fine idea. Your friend would be kept here in India perhaps many, many

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months waiting to give evidence. No, I would instead obtain some very, very suitable persons."

The professor shrugged her burly shoulders. "As you like, Inspector, as you like. But do hurry up or our birds will have flown the coop."

Resenting obscurely being put under this pressure, Ghote picked up his phone, got through to the nearby Tilak Marg Police Station, whose good offices he relied on in situations like this, and requested that an officer should come round as quickly as possible with two of their regular *panches*.

"And, listen," he added, "do not send the sort of fellows you are using when it is just only a question of pulling in some chain-snatcher. This is a Number One important business. So find some *panches* claiming full respect, yes? This is a fifty–sixty-lakh theft case. More."

He got quick and complete agreement. Fifty–sixty lakhs was big money.

But when the two witnesses and a sub-inspector met them outside the little press-room hut near the entrance to the Headquarters compound, Ghote saw at once that they were by no means the respectable citizens he had so carefully specified. One was a very old man with a mouth that hung slackly open to reveal a single long yellow tooth, probably a retired office peon to judge by the raggedy khaki jacket that covered his bare chest. And the other, though much younger, was scarcely more presentable, a *pinjari*, one of the itinerant fluffers-up of cotton mattresses who go about Bombay advertising their services by loudly twanging the single taut wire of the harplike instrument they use in their work.

Nor was Sub-Inspector Jadhav more likely to impress the British professor, Ghote thought. He was a stocky, cocky fellow, who at once attempted to take charge of the whole operation.

"I am bringing four–five constables, Inspector," he said. "You were not requisitioning, but for a job like this you would be needing some fellows who know how to get a suspect ready to talk."

"No, I was not requisitioning," Ghote snapped out, "and let me remind you I am in charge of this operation, S.I."

He turned to the little group of tough-looking uniformed men at the sub-inspector's heels. "Report back to your station *ek dum*," he barked. "At the double, at the double."

Turning, he bundled the two *panches* and the sub-inspector into

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the back of the jeep he had waiting, opened its front door for the British professor, scrambled in himself, and told the driver to go as fast as he could under the professor's directions to the Hrishikesh Agnihotri Museum.

The place proved to be a large dilapidated-looking house, heavy with ornate wooden carving in the style of Gujarati mansions of some hundred years earlier.

They mounted the impressive steps and Ghote knocked thunderously on the solid wide door.

No answer came.

"What did I tell you, Inspector?" the professor snorted. "Flown the coop, both of them."

Ghote, fighting off a sinking feeling that the culprits had indeed made off, hammered on the door once more.

"Better I should go round the back, Inspector," S.I. Jadhav said. "You often catch fellows who are absconding that way. Pity we were not bringing some more men."

Keeping half an eye on Jadhav to make sure he did not start to act on his own initiative, Ghote raised his hand to knock yet again. But as he did so, he heard beyond the thick door the slap-slap-slap of someone approaching with feet in loose-fitting *chappals*.

A moment later the door was opened a cautious inch or two.

The man who peered out at them was plainly the Museum's Founder and Chairman of Trustees. Learning and respectability were written on him from head to foot, from his wizened agedness, from the gold-rimmed spectacles halfway along his thin and inquisitive nose, right down to his mismatched *chappals*, one pale-brown leather, the other black.

"Public admitted at a fee of rupees three per person," he said.

"I am not at all public," Ghote returned sharply. "It is police. I am wishing to examine your premises for the purpose of ascertaining whether there is to be found upon same one idol of Goddess Parvati, together with various other—er—er—artefacts."

Whether it was the production of this last impressive word or the explicit mention of a statue of Parvati, Ghote's statement appeared to stun the museum's Founder and Chairman. His mouth opened. And shut. He fell back a pace.

Swiftly Ghote pushed the heavy front door wide and stepped into a narrow entrance hall lined with a series of tall glass-fronted cupboards. He turned to Professor Prunella, close at his heels.

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"Kindly lead at once to wheresoever the idol of Parvati is to be found," he said.

Unhesitatingly, the professor marched off. Following, Ghote took in that the tall cupboards to either side were crammed and jammed with an extraordinary variety of objects. One contained vases of all shapes and sizes—china, brass, enameled. Another was a jumble of clocks, elegant old European ones, cranky alarms, even a plastic kitchen-timer. A third was apparently filled with measuring devices, ancient sticks marked with notches, lengths of cord regularly knotted, rulers in bundles, even some round metal spring-loaded tapes.

On they went through an archway and into a series of tiny, floor-to-ceiling-filled rooms, each devoted, it seemed, to one or other of the many -ologies and -ancies the museum served the nation by preserving. The Founder and Chairman came clacking after them on his mismatched *chappals*, uttering from time to time little squeaks of protest or dismay.

S.I. Jadhav, swaggering along with his two disreputable *panches*, showed, whenever Ghote chanced to look back for a moment, a hair-raising tendency to swipe at any object that looked as if it might be easy to topple—a display of china European farm animals, a pile of inkwells of all sorts heaped one on the other, even a chair made entirely out of glass in a room devoted wholly to such furniture. The aged first *panch* broke out every now and again into a wild cackle of laughter and his younger companion, the *pinjari*, apparently felt that the higgledy-piggledy dignity of his surroundings obliged him to pause at the entrance to each successive little room and emit from his fluffing instrument one loud resounding twang.

Ghote thanked his stars that the British professor was too intent on her onward rush to the possibly stolen Parvati to pay attention to the rest of his party.

At last they came to a narrow downward-leading flight of stairs, each step used to display some other object from the museum's collection—four or five different hookahs, a framed picture of an English cottage turned sideways, a small board hung with various patterns of padlock.

At the stairs' foot they plunged once more into another series of little rooms. Professor Mrs. or Miss Prunella seemed to know her way, unerring as a bloodhound on the scent.

In the gloom here, the Founder and Chairman regained his voice and began to shoot out explanations of the riches under his control. "Opal water," he said, gesturing abruptly to a tall glass jar half full

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of some cloudy liquid. "Where there is poison, there is also nectar, that is a mathematical truth." Then in the next little chamber, "Alchemy Department. We are doing many experiments to turn copper into gold. Gold into copper also." And in a room containing coins and banknotes of every conceivable kind—Ghote had to stop and prevent the *pinjari* secreting a heap of little silver pieces—"Kindly notice the Arab currency notes, all misprinted, very, very rare." And in yet another room, its walls lined with narrow shelves on which rested, dustily, stones of every color and shape, "One thousand different, full of scientific importance, magical point-of-view, astrological point-of-view."

This last utterance was too much even for relentlessly forward-marching Professor Prunella. She turned briefly and barked out over her shoulder, "Charlatan. Poppycock."

Ghote, alternating during the whole of their clattering progress between being impressed by the sheer quantity of learned objects and feeling darts of doubt over the Founder's claims about them, felt grateful that the professor made no further assertions of her uncompromising beliefs until they came, at last, to a faded loop of red rope barring their way.

Professor Prunella unhesitatingly thrust it aside, as doubtless she had done on her earlier visit. She strode forward a pace or two into the denser gloom of an ill-lit short corridor, reached up, and clicked on a light switch.

"There," she said.

Behind, the *pinjari* gave not one but a whole succession of reverberant twangs on his instrument.

Screwing up his face in an effort to blot out all awareness of the sound, Ghote could not but recognize that, a yard or two further down the corridor, there stood an idol of Parvati, "the princess of the fish-shaped eyes" herself. Seated on the representation of a stool, with one leg tucked under, halfway toward the lotus position.

"It is from the Gudalpore Temple?" he asked the professor.

"Stake my life on it. It's my subject, you know. This is going to make one hell of a paper for Indian Sculpture Studies."

Ghote turned, with curious reluctance, to the Founder and Chairman. "Sir," he said, "are you able to account for the presence here of an object that appears to have been removed from the Temple at Gudalpore without due and proper authorization?"

The aged amasser of all the varied objects they had seen licked

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at his thin lips. He cast a long, searching look over the rounded limbs and tall-crowned head of the stone goddess.

"The making of this museum," he said, "has been my lifelong work."

"That is not an answer," Ghote replied, forcing himself to unrelenting severity, despite a prickle of doubt somehow running through him like an underground tremor, unaccountable but not to be ignored.

He waited for the old man to speak again. But he seemed to find it difficult to produce any further words.

"Come, Inspector," Professor Prunella said with a snort of indignation, "you have my word for it: this is the Parvati from Gudalpore and nowhere else." And as if to emphasize her certainty, she gave the rounded form of the goddess a resounding slap across her shoulder.

Ghote winced.

"Good, good," suddenly exclaimed the *pinjari* in broad Marathi. "I would give a beauty like that more slaps than one."

Ghote hoped profoundly that the professor's Indian studies had not given her an acquaintance with local vulgarities. Apparently they had not because she simply contented herself with keeping the slapping hand on the goddess's shoulder in a distinctly proprietorial manner.

Ghote turned again to the Founder.

"Sir," he said, "you have not yet given proper answer to my request concerning this idol."

And then the old man did reply.

"No," he shot out, as if the single word of denial had been a hard bubble deep within him whose passage at last could not be resisted. "No, no, no. Who can say where such a fine object can have come from? This Parvati may have been in my storeroom many, many years."

Ghote found himself in a dilemma. The Founder and Chairman's response had clearly not been wholly satisfactory. Yet, equally clearly, it was a denial that this idol of Parvati, one after all among many thousands that must exist all over India, was the selfsame object that had once been in the Gudalpore Temple. But, on the other hand, the British lady professor had declared uncompromisingly that the Parvati was from Gudalpore. She had said firmly that she herself had seen it there. Yet she might be mistaken. That had been ten years ago, after all. And then one had a duty as an Indian not

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to accept each and every statement a Westerner cared to make as a holy truth. A patriotic duty even, though difficult.

"Inspector," Professor Prunella snapped out now, "arrest this man."

It almost decided Ghote. He was damned if he was going to carry out an arrest on the order of a Westerner, an *angrezi* even, relic of the British Raj, and, worse, a woman. But on the other hand—

Then he heard cocky Sub-Inspector Jadhav come clicking to attention as if to acknowledge orders from a senior officer he was showing the utmost willingness to comply with.

No, if the Founder and Chairman was to be arrested on a charge of concealing property knowing it to have been stolen, then that task was not going to fall to a little jumped-up fellow from Tilak Marg Police Station. It was—

But suddenly, from immediately behind the tall statue of the fish-eyed princess, there came the rending squeal of heavy wood on stone and a small door there was abruptly thrust open. In the narrow doorway there stood a bare-chested man of huge proportions, bullet-headed, heavy-jowled, arms loose-hanging.

Instinctively Ghote stiffened, expecting instant attack.

"Ah, Manik, there you are," the Founder and Chairman said with sudden cheerfulness. "Just when I am wanting you."

The hulk in the doorway answered only with a grunt, though he seemed to have understood.

"Manik, have you moved this Parvati idol?" the Founder and Chairman asked. "Where was it kept before?"

He turned to Ghote. "You will hardly believe it," he said urgently, "but the museum has accumulated so many important objects in so many fields of Indology that at times even I begin to forget where and when they were acquired."

The declaration had the effect, for no conceivable reason, of causing the old, slack-mouthed ex-peon *panch* to break out into another of his long cackling laughs. Was it, could it be, Ghote thought, somehow a mocking comment on what the old museum owner had claimed? And should he act on it?

He was saved, however, from feeling he had been swayed by any such ridiculous motive by the explosive shrilling of a large bell clamped to the wall nearby, connected to a telephone elsewhere in the old building.

"Some person offering some new object for the collection," the

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Founder immediately claimed. "Or perhaps they are wanting to arrange some seminar." He made as if to go and answer.

Ghote quickly stepped across and laid a detaining hand on his arm.

The old man turned to Manik. "Go and answer it," he said. "I really must give this gentleman and lady my fullest attention."

The silent hulk shuffled off in the direction of the stairs.

"S.I., go with him," Ghote snapped. "See he makes no attempt to leave."

Turning from making sure the sub-inspector had obeyed, Ghote saw that the Founder and Chairman had darted off to the little narrow doorway behind the Parvati statue. Brushing past the substantial form of the British professor, still laying claim to the goddess, Ghote dived through the doorway in pursuit.

But he found that the old man was not making for any tiny back entrance, as he had feared. Instead, he was moving rapidly from one object to another in the dimly lighted storeroom, peering at representations of gods and goddesses, some so thickly covered in dust as to be almost unrecognizable, others clearly to be seen as elephant-trunked or many-armed or many-headed, playing flutes, astride peacocks, chipped here, broken almost in half there, complete to the last detail elsewhere.

"Sir," he said, sharply as he could, "I am not at all satisfied by your answers till date. Kindly accompany me back to the idol in question and give detailed assurances."

For a moment it looked as if the old man was going to ignore him. But he straightened up at last, breathed a heavy sigh, and made his way out to stand on the other side of the disputed Parvati from the stout, competing form of Professor Prunella, still with her hand on the goddess's shoulder.

Ghote felt that the pair of them were somehow presenting his dilemma to him as a living picture. Which of the two had the real right to possess Parvati? Was it the imperious lady professor, bringing to her claim all the overwhelming confidence of the West? Or was it this old man, steeped in the philosophies of the East, seeing this Parvati as one among the many, many accumulations of a lifetime of gathering objects to illustrate and enhance the concept of Indology? —And yet, had there not been something distinctly doubtful about the way he had advanced his claim to possession of the princess? But there again, the British professor had surely been more aggressive in her demands than was altogether right. She had

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spoken of a contribution to—what was it?—the *Indian Sculpture Studies* as if that meant more to her than anything else.

So could she have—? But then, could he not—?

Ghote was unable, faced with the living picture, to prevent himself looking with fervent prayerfulness to the goddess herself, as if from her stone lips the answer might somehow come.

And it did.

Because suddenly he realized there was a way of making sure this Parvati was the Gudalpore Parvati. An almost certain way.

Sub-Inspector Jadhav had just returned, sullenly shepherding in front of him the huge silent bulk of the man Manik.

"S.I.," Ghote said to him, "keep sharp watch on each and every person here. I would not be one moment." And, without waiting for any acknowledgment of the order, he set off at a run through all the little crammed and crowded rooms of the basement area, past the thousand different dusty stones, past the misprinted Arab currency, past the alchemic apparatus, past the tall jar of opal water. He took the stairs two at a time, ignoring padlocks, hookahs, everything. And on he went, still hurrying fast as he dared, past glass chairs and bedsteads, past china farm animals—how did they reflect Indology? no matter—past the heaped pile of different inkwells, till at last he came to the entrance hall. And to the glass-fronted cupboard that contained measuring instruments from the most distant past to the present day. Without hesitation, he wrenched open its door, reached up, and took from its place one of the neat, modern measuring tapes he had seen almost without seeing it as Professor Prunella had hurried them toward her quarry. To the tape he added, as a last-second afterthought, one of the straight notched sticks from the most distant past.

Then, in even less time than it had taken him to get to the cupboard, he ran back to where the disputed Parvati stood. The Founder and Chairman had not budged from his place at one side of the stone goddess, nor had the British professor moved from her position on the other side. Each silently asserted possession as firmly as before.

"Excuse, please," Ghote said.

And he brushed the two claimants aside, took the notched stick he had seized, and laid one end on the topmost stone jewel of the princess's crown. Then he swiveled the stick's other end until it touched the nearest point on the wall behind, and made there a tiny scratch on the plaster.

Next, swiftly kneeling, he took the spring-loaded tape, zipped it

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open, and measured the exact distance between his scratched mark and the floor beneath. The tape, he found with sudden relief, was marked in centimeters rather than inches. And in a moment he was able to look up and proclaim triumphantly, "One hundred and forty-seven."

"One hundred and forty what, for heaven's sake?" Professor Prunella boomed. "Have you gone dotty, Inspector?"

"Madam," Ghote replied, still kneeling on the floor, "not one hundred and forty, but one hundred and forty-seven. One hundred and forty-seven centimeters, the exact height of the idol of Parvati stolen from the Gudalpore Temple, and reported on first-class authority to be kept hidden in Bombay for inspection by foreign buyer or buyers unknown."

"You're telling me nothing I haven't been saying all along," Professor Prunella answered, puffing her chest out to wonderfully new dimensions. "Arrest this man. Haven't I told you it's your duty half a dozen times already?"

Ghote rose to his feet. "Madam," he said, "I am thinking I very well know what is my duty."

He took a deep breath. As he had knelt checking the exact figure on his measuring tape, a number of things he had observed in his brief time in the Hrishikesh Agnihotri Museum had formed into a pattern in his head. A satisfyingly coherent pattern. "Madam," he said, still looking steadily at the majestic form of the British professor, "there is not only the question of one Parvati idol itself, there is the question of other artefacts also."

"What?"

"Madam, from the Gudalpore Temple there were also stolen four terracotta representations of God Ganesha—that is with the elephant head, as you must very well be knowing—plus also one Goddess Sarasvati, riding as per custom upon a peacock, in this case with tail partly missing. Plus again two God Krishnas, playing upon flutes together, with eighteen other artefacts, various. Madam, in this storeroom just only behind where I am standing I have observed, as also has Mr. Agnihotri, each and every one of these items, notably free from dust. So, madam, what is to be learnt from this?"

"Why, damn it, that this fellow has stolen the whole lot from Gudalpore."

"Not so, madam. I have told. Mr. Agnihotri was just only examining these items. He was not attempting further to conceal same. No doubt he was wishing that, like this Parvati idol, they were

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objects he had at some faraway time acquired, but he knew in the core of his heart that they were not. No, madam, he was not responsible for hiding these things."

"Then who the— No, wait, I know. My Mr. Poe's Indian guest at breakfast this morning."

"No, madam, no. It was the person strong enough to move from place to place one Goddess Parvati in sandstone, one hundred and forty-seven centimeters in height. The person who also, though he is appearing dumb, can very well answer telephones and could also communicate with accomplices suggesting to them to hide Parvati among so many other gods and goddesses. A most clever device used, I am thinking, by Mr. Edgar Allan Poe in the story by the name of 'The Purloined Letter.' "

He shot out an order to Sub-Inspector Jadhav.

"Take him to your station and charge-sheet him, in my name, with concealing twenty-six various artefacts, knowing them to have been stolen."

"Artefacts, Inspector?" the S.I. inquired, a frown on his face even as he grabbed the hefty and bewildered Manik.

"Yes, man, artefacts. Artefacts. Are you not knowing what are artefacts?"

## ON OUR COVER

Greg Louganis won his first Olympic medal (silver, in platform diving) at the 1976 games at age 16. He is the only diver to score a perfect ten in national and international competition, he has won more national titles than anyone in history (43 to date), he is the only diver to win both three-meter springboard and platform events at the 1976, 1980, and 1984 Olympic trials and to break the 700-point barrier on the ten-meter platform (at the 1984 games). He is a three-time NCAA Diving Champion, nine-time World Champion (both platform and springboard), Gold Medalist in three-meter springboard and platform events at the 1979, 1983, and 1987 Pan American games, and Double Gold Medalist at the 1984 Olympics. He won the AAU James E. Sullivan Award as Amateur Athlete of the Year at the 1984 games and was inducted into the Olympic Hall of Fame in 1985. In 1983 he graduated from the University of California, where he majored in drama.

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*"Stop that! Stop that noise!" Alice demanded. "You just be quiet and listen to me. You look old enough to understand this." The child clutched her ears, but Alice forced the small hands, cold as little stones, down and gripped them . . .*

# BRIGHT SCISSORS, SHARP AS PAIN

**by E. J. WAGNER**

So intent was Alice, as she unpacked the china—so careful not to let any of the translucent, cream-colored cups slip through her fingers—that she never heard the afternoon school bus arrive, never had a chance to brace herself against the quick shiver of pain and loss she still felt at the sound of children laughing and whooping as they chased each other through fallen leaves vivid as blood.

Don't listen, she told herself, you don't have to listen. Just concentrate on what you're doing. One thing at a time, one day at a time. That was what the therapist who had helped her work through her feelings of agonized guilt had said.

She walked to the sink and began to run lukewarm water into the dishpan so that she could rinse off the fine film of dust that clung to the dishes after the many months in storage. That's it, she encouraged herself. That's it. Just one thing at a time. Concentrate on what you're doing. Then you won't start to remember, and you won't start to cry. She thought of calling David, then recalled the still-unconnected phone. Never mind, better to face it through herself. She couldn't call David every time something reminded her.

She turned on the water a bit harder so that it would drown out the children's sounds—and so it was through the rush of water that she first heard the knocking at the door. She tried to ignore it, hoping that whoever it was would go away, so that she wouldn't have to answer, so that she wouldn't have to talk, but the knocking persisted, and finally she gave in, drying her hands on a towel, walking down the hall with a briskness she didn't feel.

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The visitor was a child, a girl of perhaps eight. She wore a red jacket over a plaid skirt, white kneesocks, and scuffed sneakers. She carried a red bookbag and a metal lunchbox with Snoopy on the lid. The brightness of her outfit was an odd contrast to her pale complexion—her skin so light and faintly tinged with blue it made Alice think of skim milk. She was evidently from the neighborhood, but Alice couldn't remember having seen her before.

"Yes?" Alice said, trying to keep her tone one of friendly inquiry. "Yes, what may I do for you, young lady?"

A wary, almost sly expression crossed the child's face. "Hi," she said. "The bus picked us up late at school and I got cold waiting for it." She had a dry, whispery little voice that reminded Alice of dead leaves rustling. "I'm *so* cold." She looked up and smiled a little, watching Alice's eyes. "I'm really cold. Can I have some hot cocoa?" The smile grew broader, knowing. "Can I?"

Then she said it, pronouncing the word with deliberation. "Mommy?"

Alice jerked away from the child, trembling with rage and humiliation. How dare they? she thought. How do they dare to do these things?

She expected the child to run now that the tormenting was done, but amazingly the child stood her ground, staring at Alice without a trace of remorse. "Can I have some cocoa?" she repeated, her voice rising to a whine—and she walked past Alice, into the house.

Shocked, Alice stared at her. The kids, the teenagers mostly, who had made her life a misery with their vicious taunts, who had probably put this little one up to this, had never gone so far before. Alice looked out the door for some sign of the instigators, but the street was empty. The other occupants of the school bus had presumably made their way home. A chill wind gusted through the leaves.

Alice knelt so that she could look the child in the face and spoke as calmly as she could, reminding herself that this was a very young child who couldn't possibly understand the enormous cruelty of the trick she was playing. "Now, look, dear. I know you think this is a funny joke to play, and I'm certain it wasn't your idea, but what you're doing makes me very unhappy and I'd like you to stop." The child's eyes dropped under Alice's steady stare. "You really must go home now. I understand you might not want to walk home alone. I'd tell you to call your mom, but our phone isn't working yet. If you like, we can go next door and make the call from there."

Alice felt stronger now that she'd been able to keep her voice level. She gently touched the little girl's hand. The child said, "No, no,

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*no!*" And then she screamed—a terrible banshee wail of rage and hate. She threw her bookbag and lunchbox and they skidded on the tile floor. "No!" she screamed. "No!"

"Stop that! Stop that noise!" Alice demanded, shouting now, too. "You listen to me! You just be quiet and listen to me. You look old enough to understand this." The child clutched her ears, but Alice forced the small hands, cold as little stones, down and gripped them. "You *will* listen." Alice's need to explain was overwhelming. "Before we moved to this house, my husband David and I lived in another house not far away. We had a little girl. She was seven years old, her name was Annie—"

Alice had to stop here to breathe slowly and evenly for a few beats, until she was sure she had the tears under control. When she began again, she spoke as much to herself as to the child.

"We had a swimming pool built in the back yard. No, that's not true. *I* had the swimming pool built in the back yard. I did it. It was my idea. My husband thought we should wait until Annie was older, but I persuaded him. I said I would be very careful, that I would watch her and never leave her alone near the pool. When I went back to teaching, we warned the babysitter. We explained that even though Annie could swim, it wasn't safe to leave her alone near the water. I really tried to be careful.

"One day in the fall—this time of year—just before the pool was covered for the winter, I stayed late at school for a conference. When I got home, there was a crowd in front of our house—and an ambulance and police—"

Alice's mind always skidded at this point. She could remember getting out of the car and running—running through the open garden gate—and seeing police and paramedics bending over the small form that lay dripping and still by the side of the pool—and the babysitter, Marcy, crying, saying something about leaving Annie just for a minute to go to the bathroom. Alice remembered saying "Please, please—let it be all right, let there be a chance—" and then seeing how very still and pale that limp form was. She remembered running again and falling to her knees on the concrete edge of the pool, smelling the chlorine, and clutching the small hands that felt so cold and heavy and stiff—like little stones—and knowing, and saying, "It's my fault. It's my fault."

The child had grown very quiet listening to Alice. She stood so still that Alice was barely conscious of her. "Afterward, after the accident, I couldn't work. I cried all the time. I cried at what they

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called 'inappropriate' places. I cried at the library. Once I cried at the supermarket. The kids in the neighborhood used to stare at me. They followed me down the street and made faces behind my back. They yelled "Crazy lady" when they passed the house. There would be phone calls in the middle of the night and someone trying to sound like a little girl would say 'Mommy—Mommy—I'm so cold!'

"So we sold our house. I wanted to move far away, but we couldn't—not now, anyway—because of David's job. But at least this is a different house, with no reminders, and no swimming pool. And I'm trying very hard to get on with things. So you must understand that it's very wrong of you to listen to the other children and play this trick on me, and that you really must go home now."

Alice stood up as she said this, and grasped the child's shoulder, bony and cold even through the red jacket, and tried to turn her toward the door. The little girl shook her head rapidly from side to side. Her colorless lips were pressed tightly together. Suddenly she wrenched free of Alice's grasp and ran down the hallway, her sneakered feet soundless.

"Come back here!" Alice cried, stung to fury. "I want you out of my house!" She ran wildly after the child, no longer caring if she was being responsible or logical or controlled. "I want you out of here, you little devil!"

The child careened down the hall with Alice after her, stopped for an instant when she reached the door of the laundry room, then tore it open and raced inside. Alice grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her violently. "Little devil!"

The child's face was contorted, as twisted as a gargoyle's. "Get away from me!" she shrilled. "Get away from me!" She pulled free and swooped around like a trapped bird, waving her arms in frantic arcs. She knocked the laundry basket full of clothes off the top of the washer. Treading on the spilled wash, stomping on it, she flung a bottle of detergent against the wall, where it broke and bled its contents over the scattered shirts and towels. "Get away from me!" she screamed. "Get away, get away, get away!" Mucous streamed from her nose.

It occurred to Alice that the child was crazed, and really not capable of understanding. She reached out to touch her. Then, appalled, she froze. Clenched in the child's fist were the wickedly sharp scissors from the mending basket. "Get away, get away, get away!"

Alice, her eyes riveted on the gleaming blades, backed slowly out of the laundry room, then with a desperate quickness she slammed

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the door shut and held it closed with all her strength against the child's shrill cry of frustrated rage. She felt the pounding on the door, the sharp rap of the scissors, and, feeling real fear now, so intense it cancelled the anger, Alice held on.

After a while—she didn't know how long exactly, ten minutes or so—the screams subsided, the pounding stopped, and a low, choked sobbing began.

Alice moved very quietly. Holding the doorknob tightly, she stretched her foot out toward the low chest filled with garden tools that stood in the hall and slowly slid it in front of the laundry-room door. It was reasonably heavy. She lowered herself onto the chest very quietly—somehow it seemed very important not to allow the girl to know what she was doing—and leaned against the door. The sobbing had grown quieter.

Alice was sure of one thing. Whatever motivated the child, Alice was terrified of letting her out of the room. She didn't dare risk getting up to allow the weight of the chest alone to keep the door shut. So there was no way to get down the hall and out the door and over to a neighbor's phone. The child might push her way out and hide somewhere in the house, those bright scissors, sharp as pain, glittering in her small cold hand. Alice knew she must sit on the chest, and control her nerves, and wait for David to come home.

It was two hours before she heard his car in the driveway. Her legs were stiff and her back, pressed against the door, ached. The child had grown completely silent. Alice strained to hear her, but there was no sound at all. Alice thought she must have fallen asleep. It seemed very cold. Perhaps the window in the laundry room was slightly open. There was a strong draft coming from under the door.

She heard David call a greeting from the front door. Afraid to waken the child, she remained silent. She saw David's square, solid figure at the end of the hall. She held her fingers to her lips in a quieting gesture, and very carefully, slipping off her shoes, she crept on stocking feet toward him. Throwing her arms about his neck, her mouth against his ear, she whispered the story.

"Oh, my God," he said, "what a terrible thing to go through. Alice, don't be so frightened. You did just fine. Go upstairs. I'll take care of it." He gently pushed her toward the stairs and started down the hall toward the door with the chest in front of it.

A wave of terror overcame Alice, watching him. She felt a sudden, intense conviction that if he opened that door something terrible

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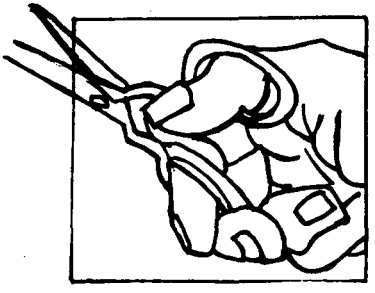
would happen, that things would never be the same again, that the child behind the door, now so strangely silent, had somehow become huge and monstrously powerful. She raced after him, grabbed his arm, and hissed her panic at him.

"Alice, Alice—it's only a child. You said it was a child. Go upstairs and let me handle this."

Alice watched him bend over and grasp the chest and slide it out of the way. She was shaking with fear, but unable to move from the spot. She thought of those little cold hands, the bright blades, of jagged bloody wounds in vulnerable flesh. "David, please don't open the door! Please don't let her out!" she begged, knowing that he would do it anyway—that she couldn't stop him—that once he did, the dreadful unnameable thing would happen—that she was watching him in this hallway for the last time, before things changed forever.

When he reached for the doorknob, she covered her face with her hands so that she wouldn't see. She heard the door creak open, a silence, then a child's wild weeping, and David's voice, steady and reassuring, saying, "It's all right, darling, it's all right. It's all right. Don't cry. I'll call the doctor. He'll come and help Mommy get better. Like he did the last time."



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a *NEW* short story by

**DAVID WILLIAMS**

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# SOMETHING TO DECLARE

## *by DAVID WILLIAMS*

Percy Crickle had been married to Sybil for seventeen years before he determined to do away with her. The decision was triggered by her attitude over the winnings. It was the sheer ingratitude that stung Percy, coming on top of the massive disappointment she had caused him.

From the very beginning, Percy's mother had insisted he was marrying beneath him—his late father had been an underpaid schoolmaster. Sybil's father was a retail grocer whom Mrs. Crickle (Senior) invariably and pointedly referred to as a tradesman. She also described overweight Sybil as a pudding, and as graceless and untutored. She could not understand what a good-looking boy like Percy saw in the girl—or woman, rather, since Sybil was already pushing thirty-four at the time of the wedding.

But Percy had been taking the long view. He was then nearly thirty himself, and still living at home. Nor had he quite settled on a career, discounting several false starts as a professional trainee. His mother had put those down to experience—which was inaccurate

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or, at best, paradoxical. Meaningful work experience was to elude Percy throughout his adult life. He partially made up for the lack with a just sustaining sort of cunning. He figured that marriage to Sybil would be bearable, and better than that when she came into her inheritance.

For her part, God-fearing and trusting Sybil was genuinely in love with Percy. This was a sentiment quite separate from the incautious and transitory pleasure she felt about getting a husband well after the point where she considered marriage a serious prospect.

As for the inheritance, Sybil was a late and only child, with parents who were hard-working, appearing prosperous—and quite old. It had seemed to Percy to be only a matter of time before the fruits of their labors fell to their offspring. When that day arrived, he dreamed he would retire from his work—type unspecified—to devote himself to personal improvement of a vaguely academic nature.

In the years following the marriage, it was Sybil who brought in the larger part of their income. She had gone on working in her father's shop, which was in a not very affluent part of Liverpool. Percy meantime elected to become a salesman, though with small success. But career setbacks never seriously perturbed him—after all, he was only marking time. There were no children of the marriage.

After sixteen years, Sybil's father died suddenly. Then it was revealed that the grocery business had been on the brink of bankruptcy for some time. Sybil's mother sold the shop, exchanging the modest sum it fetched for a life annuity. So it was doubly unfortunate that she also died soon after: the annuity died with her. That was the end of Sybil's expectancy.

Since it was the prospect of the retail fortune that had kept Percy going, its failure to materialize upset him severely. The year that followed was the most depressing in his life. It burned in him, too, that Sybil continued to earn considerably more than he did. She had become chief checkout assistant in a supermarket.

But it was the sense of injustice that hurt Percy most—and he made no bones about that. He no longer bothered to conceal from Sybil that he had married her for her father's money, now that it was clear her father had had no money.

It was no good Sybil reminding Percy that her father's engagement present to her had been the house they still lived in. Percy had now taken to denouncing that very act of benevolence as a mere stra-

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tegem, alleging bizarrely that if her scheming father had not provided a roof for her, Sybil would probably by now be living in a hostel for aging spinsters.

There was really no end to Percy's calculated unkindnesses. They made Sybil very sad and dejected, and this prompted her to eat more, so that she became even fatter than before. But if she'd been disillusioned about the reason for her marriage, and left in no doubt about why it survived at all (the house being in her name, Percy had nowhere else to live), Sybil's love for her husband still miraculously endured. If she was miserable in herself, in charity she was also deeply sorry for Percy, whose values she now realized had always been horribly distorted. She prayed over that.

Sybil had never let on that she risked a modest stake on the football pools each week. So it came as nothing less than a miracle to Percy when she quietly announced one day that she had won a first dividend—a fraction over £300,000. The sum far exceeded what Percy had expected Sybil might have inherited from her father. He was overjoyed, magnanimously allowing that her past failure to meet his financial goals could now be overlooked. He also made arrangements to quit his latest job as a local government clerk—too early, as it proved.

If Percy's attitude to Sybil had altered, so had hers toward him. Now that she was in the ascendant position, she determined to stay there, while striving to put some goodness, unselfishness, and a right balance into his nature. To begin with, instead of depositing her winnings in their joint bank account, she opened a new account with it in her sole name at a quite different bank. She refused also to consider moving to a larger house, to relinquish her job, or to fund any drastic change in their style of living. She did give Percy a small weekly allowance—but only so long as he stayed in work. The regular donations she started making to deserving charities, she explained, were uplifting thank offerings on behalf of both of them.

Far from being uplifted, Percy came to feel even more cheated than before, though this time he hesitated to say as much. And no amount of gentle persuasion on his part would alter Sybil's attitudes. He even started to accompany her to church, something he had never done before and which he only did now to show how his values had changed.

Certainly this did impress Sybil, and increased her trust in him, but she continued to insist that the new money would be needed to

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protect them in their old age. She remained oblivious to Percy's plea that there was enough to cover middle-age as well, starting immediately. Sybil had her own reasons for cautioning him that someday one of them would be left to survive alone—possibly to a very great age. There she had made a mistake, for it was thinking about that very thing that put homicide into Percy's mind.

Sybil's other mistake was her one significant concession. She determined to indulge a lifelong aspiration by taking a cruise. After a great deal of searching through brochures, she settled on a two-week, late-spring voyage in the Bay of Bengal—it was cheaper than most others, and she had always wanted to see India and Burma. Percy was welcome to go with her if he wished, although since he distrusted foreigners and loathed foreign countries she offered as an alternative to pay for him to spend the same period at a three-star hotel in Torquay, a resort he had always favored.

Percy chose the cruise with an avidity he had difficulty in disguising, but disguise it he did to avoid giving rise to suspicion. Although he detested "abroad," at the first suggestion of the trip the possibility of arranging an accidental death at sea positively leapt into the forefront of his mind. Torquay could wait.

They flew from London to Sri Lanka to join the cruise ship in Colombo. It was Polish-owned, middle-sized, and middle-aged. Its four-week total itinerary took in ports around the Bay of Bengal, then Malaysia, Singapore, Borneo, and Java before it returned via the western coast of Sumatra. Passengers could engage for half the cruise, as Percy and Sybil were doing, joining or leaving the ship in Sri Lanka or Malaysia.

The two were given an outside cabin on the second deck near the center, close to the stairs to the upper deck, where the restaurant and bar were located. Above the upper deck was the boat deck, for open-air promenading, with a swimming pool aft. Although their cabin had a porthole, Percy early determined with reluctance that it was too small to squeeze fat Sybil through, kicking or otherwise.

In the restaurant, they were obliged permanently to share a table for four. The limited number of smaller tables was reserved for passengers taking the whole cruise. Their two female table companions were also the occupants of one of the cabins next door to their own: this was one of the earliest disclosures during the polite exchanges at the first meal.

The women, Kirsty Redley, a widow, and her unmarried younger

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sister, Rita Stork, were a vivacious pair of slim and attractive, if somewhat brassy, blondes. They both looked to be under thirty and were altogether a contrast to the other passengers, who in the main were much older and decidedly staider. Indeed, people wondered what two such youthful, glamorous spirits were doing on such a predictably unexciting cruise. If they were there in the hope of making new men friends, the girls must have been disappointed—the few disengaged males aboard were very old indeed.

In consequence, the more perceptive wives kept watchful eyes on their husbands when Mrs. Redley and Miss Stork were close. This applied especially in the case of Rita Stork, a competent and seemingly ever-present amateur photographer, whose obsession with taking candid shots was not always appreciated by her subjects. She snapped the Crickles more often than others, perhaps because Sybil seemed to enjoy the experience.

Tolerant Sybil did not regard the girls as predators. As for Percy, while accepting that his late mother would unquestionably have described Kirsty and Rita as common, he was delighted at being thrown with them so regularly, even if their frank conversation and sometimes their behavior struck him as daring. If he had not had a more burning issue on his mind, he would certainly have responded to what he took to be Rita's occasional explorative advances under the table.

As it was, though, Percy was applying himself wholly to creating the perfect opportunity for pushing Sybil overboard—an exercise that was proving more difficult than he had expected. The deed could certainly not be done in daylight, nor from a place where her fall was likely to be seen or her cries heard. It also needed to be at a time when Sybil's absence wouldn't cause immediate alarm. Above all, the circumstances had to be such that no blame or suspicion could be leveled at Percy.

Their time aboard was over half completed before Percy was satisfied that he had a usable plan. Even then, he was to depend on the right weather conditions, and fearful that they might never occur.

Encouraged by her husband, every night after dinner Sybil took a turn around the boat deck in his company. Since the nights were often quite cool, most of the few passengers who liked to walk at this time did so on the closed main deck, which also saved them from having to climb another flight of steps. After their exercise,

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Percy would escort Sybil to their cabin, then he would ring for a pot of tea to be sent along to her before he returned to the main-deck lounge to play bridge with a group of regulars. Sybil didn't care for card games, and in any case she liked to go to bed early with a book.

The duty steward usually brought the tea promptly. If over-modest Sybil was still undressing when he knocked, she would call to him to leave the tray outside. Percy knew this because on one night that it happened he was in the bathroom, and on a subsequent night when it happened he had purposely locked himself in there, to check if she would do so again as well as to make an important preparation.

It was in the Adaman Sea that Percy pushed Sybil over. The ship was just out of Rangoon on the three-day run to Port Kelang in Malaysia, where the Crickles were due to disembark. As they finished dinner, a bout of heavy rain had just eased off. The night was uninviting—not cold, but dank and overcast. Altogether, the conditions were perfect for Percy's plan.

Sybil took some persuading to come to the open deck, which was otherwise predictably empty, but she did so to please Percy, even though she had been feeling unwell. When Percy paused to look over the side, just behind the davit of the aftermost lifeboat, Sybil paused with him. There was no one else in view. The lifeboat prevented the couple from being seen by the lookout on the bridge deck, just as the same object shaded them somewhat from the general illumination. Percy had planned their position carefully.

"See the flying fish?" he questioned eagerly.

As Sybil leaned across the rail, squinting with enthusiasm, he stepped behind her, grasped both her ankles, and heaved her into eternity.

The splash she made hardly registered in the rush of water along the ship's side. Her cry was lost in the churning made by the port screw close to where she went in. Any further sign of her was lost in the immediate tumult of the ship's wake, and then in the murk and darkness. She died quickly—of shock, not drowning. The metabolic imbalance that caused her obesity had long put her heart and life at risk. She had been taking treatment without telling Percy, while doing her best to teach him how to fend for himself without her.

After what had been at once the most frightening as well as the most despicable act of his whole worthless life, Percy finished his promenade alone. For the time being, the balance of his mind was

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sustained by what he urged himself to regard as the justice of his cause. It happened he met no one as he went down to the cabin at around the usual time, but an encounter would still not have troubled him.

Sybil had complained of feeling off-color at lunch and dinner. She had mentioned it to several people. The cause was the cold-cure capsule that Percy had surreptitiously dissolved in her early-morning tea after he heard the weather forecast. Cold cures upset her. If anyone had asked, her indisposition would explain why she had returned to their cabin ahead of Percy.

He rang for her tea as usual.

When the steward knocked, Percy played the tape he had made in the bathroom of Sybil's shrill: "Oh, leave it outside, please! Thank you!"

But before the man could do as instructed, Percy opened the door. "Okay, I'll take it," he said, placing the tray just inside the cabin and calling in the direction of the bathroom, "Sleep well, darling—I won't be late!" Then he stepped into the corridor and closed the cabin door. "My wife isn't feeling well," he remarked to the steward as they moved together in the direction of the stairs. "Needs sleep, that's all. Keep an ear open in case she phones, though, would you? If she should need me, I'll be in the main lounge, playing bridge."

"Very good, sir," the Pole replied, gratefully pocketing the overlarge tip, which had been intended to mark events clearly in his mind.

Two hours later, Percy looked up from his cards to glance at the time. "Oh, lord, I promised to look in on my wife before now."

"I'll go," said his partner, the normally reticent Miss Mold, understood to be a retired nurse. She was dummy for the hand. "I need to freshen up, anyway. Give me your key."

He had been relying on her to volunteer. He had mentioned earlier that Sybil hadn't been feeling up to scratch.

Miss Mold returned shortly to report that Sybil wasn't in the cabin, that her bed hadn't been used, and that the contents of a sleeping-pill bottle had been spilled onto the counterpane.

Percy affected puzzlement, not alarm. "That's strange," he said. "Perhaps she found it too hot in the cabin. Or felt better, and went for a walk. D'you think I should go and look for her?"

"Who's lost? Not Sybil?" It was Rita Stork's voice. She had come up behind Miss Mold. "I'm not sure, but I think I saw her going up

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to the boat deck about an hour ago. She was ever so groggy at dinner."

Percy found Rita's mistaken observation almost too good to be true. Now, with a deeply concerned expression, he asked to be excused from the game to look for his wife. Rita and Miss Mold came with him. After they had searched both promenade decks, the cinema and games rooms on the third deck, and checked the cabin frequently, it was Rita who suggested they should tell the pursuer.

In another hour, the Captain reluctantly decided to turn the ship about. By then the crew and most of the passengers had been engaged in a meticulous search for Sybil, who had failed to respond to repeated summonses over the broadcasting system. A now-distracted Percy was plied with the professional ministrations of Miss Mold and the warmly feminine ones of Rita Stork.

Sybil's body was never found, although the sea search went on well into the following afternoon, with other ships in the vicinity assisting. Everyone agreed with the Captain's verdict—that Sybil, sick, had gone for a walk on the open deck and, fuddled by phenobarbitone, had fallen overboard. It seemed to be the only explanation.

People were deeply sympathetic to Percy—especially Rita, her sister Kirsty, and quiet Miss Mold. He stayed in his cabin for almost the remainder of the voyage, appearing only once for a meal and affecting then to be completely broken.

Late on their last night at sea, Rita came to see him from next door—to make sure that he was all right, she explained. It was nearly midnight, and after most people had retired. He was in bed already, reading a girlie magazine, which he quickly hid at Rita's knock. For her benefit, he also adopted his bereft expression, while not being able to resist stealing lascivious glances at her when he thought she wasn't looking. She was wearing a frilly negligee loosely fastened over a low-cut, diaphanous nightie.

After making a show of tidying the cabin, Rita poured a whiskey and took it to Percy. "Drink it. It'll do you good. Help you sleep." Her fingers stayed on his as he took the glass. "Now is there anything else you need? Anything at all?" She sat on the bed and crossed her legs, allowing the negligee to fall open completely.

"You could—you could kiss me goodnight," he half stammered, hoping it sounded like an innocent request for further harmless consolation.

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"Oh, you poor man. And *I'd* like that, Percy love," she answered. "I'd like that very much. So let's do it properly, shall we?" She stood up, letting the negligee fall from her, then she opened the bedclothes and slipped in beside him.

The following day was to be an unnerving one for Percy.

Because of the delay in searching for Sybil, the ship arrived at Port Kelang well behind schedule and too late for departing passengers to reach Kuala Lumpur in time to catch their flight to London. Since the ship had to leave almost immediately, the passengers were sent by train to the Malaysian capital, to spend the night in a hotel there at the shipping company's expense.

There clearly being no purpose in Percy keeping Sybil's clothes, before leaving the ship he gave most of them to a stewardess who was more or less Sybil's size. As far as he remembered later, it was he who had suggested Rita and Kirsty should each choose a keepsake from Sybil's other things, in gratitude for the comfort they had given him—publicly and otherwise. Rita had chosen the bright-red cashmere wrap Sybil had bought in Madras and had afterward worn frequently. Kirsty had selected a chunky and distinctive necklace.

After the short train journey, Percy reported as instructed to the British High Commissioner's Office. He was there for some hours, giving a detailed account of the tragedy. In addition, he had to go over the Captain's and the Deck Officer's reports, which arrived from the Polish Embassy after some delay and then had to be translated, along with a deposition from the steward who was the last person Sybil was known to have spoken to before her death. In the English version, at least, the steward's statement implied that he had seen Sybil as well as heard her. Percy was glad to confirm that this had been the case, confident that the man was not likely to be available again to correct him.

The First Secretary who dealt with Percy was earnest, sympathetic, unconcerned with time, and quite unruffled that Sybil, a British citizen, had met her death while under Polish jurisdiction, in Burmese waters, with the case now to be cleared in conformity with Malaysian law. It seemed there were well tried procedures to meet these complicated circumstances, and the procedures had to be observed exhaustively, but the matter seemed to be concluded at the point where Percy gravely signed a form stating that should Sybil's remains ever come to light, they should be reverently and promptly returned to Britain. His pen hesitated over the choice of

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whether his wife's remains should in that event be despatched by air or by sea. In the end, he opted for air as showing greater keenness on his part. He was thereafter free to go home next day.

"Would you like me to take you to the airport in the morning?" asked the First Secretary as they were about to part. "I'll be glad to get you diplomatic cover through Customs and so on. After what you've been through, you deserve to be spared all that."

"No, thanks just the same," Percy answered, anxious to get beyond the reach of serious officialdom. Customs would be no problem.

"Very well. As part of a cruise group in transit, you shouldn't really have any trouble," the diplomat told him.

What had come after Sybil's murder had drained Percy much more than the act itself. Now he just wanted to be left alone, with nothing to worry about—and the thick end of £300,000 waiting for him to enjoy.

He was sorry not to see Rita again that night, but the sisters had told him they would be out for the evening. It was after ten o'clock when he got to the hotel. Before going to bed, he took coffee with the ever solicitous Miss Mold. This was hardly a substitute for Rita's amorous attentions, but it still would not do for him to be seen too much in the company of nubile, younger females. Rita had advised as much before she left him the night before. "Well, you can't be in mourning forever, can you, love? It's not natural," she had said, snuggling close to him. "But you know how people are. You don't want this lot thinking you're cutting loose too early. Different when we get home," she had ended, the words heavy with promise as she traced a finger over his lips.

He had kept his distance from the sisters on the train, and would continue to do so for the rest of the journey home. Little did happy-go-lucky Rita know, he mused, that it was suspicion of murder he had to avoid, not just the idle gossip of the overconventional. But she had the right idea.

And so Percy was surprised when Rita telephoned him early next morning, pressing him to come to the room she was sharing with her sister. It was after breakfast, and nearly time for the bus that was taking their party to the airport.

"Sweetie, our bags are going to be overweight," she complained when he joined her. "It's Kirsty's fault. She's always buying heavy presents." There was no sign of Kirsty—only Rita, managing to look pert, sexy, and dependent all at the same time. She wrapped her

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arms around Percy's neck and kissed him warmly. "Will you be an angel and take some of our stuff?" she pleaded in a little-girl-lost voice.

"Of course, anything for you. Give me whatever you want to get rid of," he answered expansively. He had remarked to her on the ship how little luggage he had, even allowing for what he had kept of Sybil's belongings.

"Just that bag—then we shan't be over the top." She pointed to a small but expensive-looking canvas holdall, then glanced at the time. "We'd better get moving."

"It's locked," said Percy, surprised that the bag weighed quite as much as it did. "Shouldn't I have the key in case—?"

"Kirsty's got it. She's gone down already. She'll give it to you later. Don't worry, you won't need it. Oh, better put your name on the label." She pushed a pen into his hand and he scribbled on the shipping company's label she had tied to the bag handle. It was a similar label to those on his own bags. "Hurry, lover." She kissed him again and pointed him toward the door.

He took the bag back to his room. Shortly afterward the porter came and carried it down with the rest of his things.

Since the girls were seated at the front of the bus, Percy chose a place at the back, beside the safe Miss Mold. One of the elderly male passengers across the aisle leaned over to say, "They're very hot on that here."

"What?"

"Drug peddling." The man pointed to the signs in several languages fixed at intervals along the luggage rack. In English, the message read: WARNING. Drug trafficking punishable by death. Do not become involved—even innocently.

"How could anyone be innocently involved in carrying drugs?" Percy asked the man.

"Nephew of a friend of mine was. Right here at the airport." He nodded authoritatively. "He was a student with very little luggage or experience. Only seventeen at the time. Someone claiming to be overweight asked him to take one of his bags. The Customs people opened it. It was a spot check."

Percy went cold. "What happened?"

"He was in jail for months. In the end they believed his story and let him go. It was a close thing, though."

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"Such a very nice hotel, wasn't it?" Miss Mold put in from the other side.

Percy answered with a brief affirmative and fell silent for the rest of the journey. Was he being duped in the same way as the student? It would explain why Rita had been so especially nice to him. Despite his natural conceit, he hadn't truly convinced himself it had been solely his magnetism that had compelled her into his bed. Now there was a sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach that she had simply been setting him up.

"We said we wouldn't be seen together," said Rita, without looking at him. He had caught up with her in the moving throng at the airport.

"What's in the bag? Is it drugs? Heroin?"

"Of course not. Now get lost, will you, darling?" She increased her pace.

"Open the bag, then. When we get to the ticket desk."

Porters were bringing in the baggage from the bus on trucks. The passengers had been told to claim their own at the check-in. There were warnings all over about smuggling drugs—even sterner than those on the bus.

"Look at the warnings," Percy insisted. "I'm not taking that bag through, Rita. Not without seeing what's in it. Where's Kirsty? She's got the key, you said."

Resigned to acknowledging his presence at last, Rita pulled him aside toward a magazine stand. "Kirsty's busy, love. I'm sorry you're behaving like this. It's only a little thing you're doing for me. Quite safe. I'd have thought it was the least you could manage after the other night. And the rest." She eyed him accusingly. "They won't be stopping you. Not after your bereavement. It's a natural, don't you see?"

"It *is* heroin. Oh, my God." He looked about him as if for help. "Well, I'm not doing it."

She had her handbag open now, resting it on the stacked magazines. "I'm afraid you are, love. Did I show you the snaps?" Her tone was relaxed. "This one's so good of you and Sybil."

The print she slipped into his hand showed Sybil halfway over the ship's rail, with himself still holding her ankles. Both their faces were in full profile. He thrust the print quickly into his pocket, staring about wildly, terrified that someone else might have seen it.

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"Here's another one I took just before that." Rita continued remorselessly. "It shows you bent down, catching hold of her legs. Don't worry, they weren't processed on the ship. I had them done overnight in Kuala Lumpur. The people who did them wouldn't have understood what was going on even if they bothered to try. They're dark exposures. I wasn't using flash, just special film. The detail's all there, though. The police wouldn't hesitate with these."

"You're not going to—"

"I am. Right now, if you're backing out of the bag. Play ball, though, and you can have the prints and the negatives after we're through Customs in London. God's honor."

"But they hang you here for smuggling drugs," he whispered desperately.

"Not always, love. Only if they catch you, which they won't. On the other hand, they'd definitely hang you for murder."

Percy drew in an agonized breath. "But you only get prison in England for—for either."

"But you're out here, darling. So you don't really have a choice, do you?" She watched the look of mute acceptance growing. "So off we go, then. And keep away from me till we're through. Oh, and if they do ask questions, don't try involving me or Kirsty, will you? If you do, we'll tell on you about Sybil straight off; understand?" She closed her bag and walked away firmly.

He stood there trying to collect his thoughts and dully watching her disappear into the crowd heading for the check-in. When he moved in the same direction, he tried to pull himself together, wishing Sybil was with him, needing to ask her what he should do.

"Your things are over there, Mr. Crickle." Miss Mold never used Christian names. "All right, are you?" she added with concern. She was in front of him at the check-in desk.

"All right, yes." He must be looking as guilty as he felt. He wiped his forehead, feeling the sweat streaming all over his body.

They were his bags all right, lying on the floor with some others still waiting to be claimed. Now the airline girl was holding her hand out for his ticket. He was just about to lift the bags onto the scales when the armed, uniformed Customs official came over and stood behind them.

"With the cruise group, are you?"

"Yes. We're in transit," Percy said.

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"These three yours?" Now the dark-skinned officer was leaning down, reading the labels.

Percy hesitated. He knew he shouldn't have, but he couldn't help himself. "Yes—they're mine."

"British?" Without waiting for an answer, the man selected a large printed card from a pack of them under his arm. The big printed words were in English, constituting a list of dutiable or prohibited items. "You know the regulations?"

The list appeared as a blur before Percy's eyes. He swallowed. "Yes."

"Do you have anything to declare?" The small Malaysian looked bored, not suspicious.

"No, nothing."

"Could you open this one, please?" He was pointing to the holdall.

Percy's knees nearly gave out under him. "Actually, that one's not mine."

"You said it was yours."

"I made a mistake. I'm—I'm mixed up at the moment. I lost my wife, you see. She fell overboard. From the ship. Just a few days ago." He was blurting out words desperately, knowing he was entitled to sympathy: the First Secretary had said so.

The Customs officer was totally unmoved by the news of the tragedy. "This bag, please. Open it."

Percy shook his head. "I don't have a key. I mean, that proves it's not mine, doesn't it?"

His expression unchanged, the man produced a big bunch of keys from his pocket.

"Mr. Crickle has just gone through a very terrible experience," Miss Mold offered from behind in the imperious tone of a senior ward sister protecting a defenseless patient.

"You want to unzip your bag?" the official interrupted. He had already opened the lock.

"It's not *mine*." But slowly Percy undid the zip, his hand brushing the label inscribed with his name in his own handwriting.

Inside the bag, a transparent envelope containing a photographic enlargement lay on top of a bright-red cashmere wrap. The print that showed through the envelope was a colored closeup of Percy and Sybil, posed smiling in deck chairs. In the photograph she was wearing the wrap, and also the chunky necklace that was half showing beside it in the bag.

The official looked at the print, then at Percy, then at the wrap

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and the necklace, and finally again at the label. Pushing aside the other items, his hands burrowed deeper into the confines of the bag.

At that point, it all became too much for Percy. He started sobbing uncontrollably.

"Fancy going all the way and hanging him," said Kirsty.

It was six months since Percy's arrest at the Kuala Lumpur airport. She and the others were relaxing over drinks in a Los Angeles hotel room. They had reached California by different routes and already disposed of the drugs they had been carrying. The evening paper carried the report of Percy's execution following the failure of a last-minute appeal.

"He deserved it," said Rita.

"Have a heart—it wasn't his own powder, it was ours."

"I mean for doing in Sybil. And for stupidity. He's properly spoiled the cruise ship into Malaysia ploy. We can't do a pickup again that way in KL for years."

Kirsty sniffed. "But it still wasn't Sybil he was done for. That was different. I'd have shopped him straight off for that, on the boat. It was your idea to use him instead—to carry an extra load. I was never sure. Neither was Gertrude. Were you, Gert?"

"Not of him, no. Only that he should have been looked after at the airport. By someone from the High Commission. Anyone bereaved like that should have been given VIP treatment, diplomatic immunity, escorted through Customs—"

"Anyway, you did your best for him."

"Trying to protect our interests, that's all. It was a shame we lost the extra package. But he did take the heat off the rest of us. Even so, it shouldn't have been that way. He should have been escorted. I don't know what the British foreign service is coming to, really I don't." Pausing to sniff, Miss Gertrude Mold then went back to her knitting.

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# THE JURY BOX
## by ALLEN J. HUBIN

It's said that there are only a few basic plots in the world—perhaps seven—which are endlessly retold. I've no basis for quarrel with that, and if it's true of all fiction it's certainly applicable to the corner of storytelling of particular interest to us.

Thomas Maxwell's *The Saberdene Variations* (Mysterious Press, $16.95) clearly retells one of the ancient stories. I won't identify precisely which one—that's something you should discover for yourself, for this is fresh, polished, and wholly absorbing. Charlie Nichols and Victor Saberdene, friends at college, kept in contact over the years as Nichols became a successful writer, Saberdene a renowned New York defense attorney. In due course, Victor married—married Caro, sister of a murder victim whose killer Caro's testimony assured of a very long jail sentence. Now Carl Varada is out of prison, unexpectedly proved innocent, and psychopathically bent on revenge. Victor asks Charlie's help to save his supremely beautiful wife. For Charlie and others, deep and deadly traps await. I read this one straight through. It would make a remarkable film as well.

Mignon F. Ballard's second novel is *Cry at Dusk* (Dodd Mead, $15.95), a good tale of the sort that would have been called gothic in the 1960s. Laura Graham was very close to her cousin Laney—until Laney drowned near her home in South Carolina. Accident, of course, because Laney had much— including a baby son—to live for, though some of the circumstances of her death are troubling. When summer relieves Laura of her teaching responsibilities, she goes to Redpath, to a high-school reunion, to see why Laney was so absorbed in an earlier death, that of a child decades before. Effective romantic suspense.

*Death Signs* (Walker, $15.95) is a first mystery novel by H. Edward Hunsberger, a Minneapolis author who has previously committed suspense short stories and a western novel. Matti Shayne, a special-education teacher of the deaf in Hunsberger's city, is asked by Lieutenant Ryder to translate when a deaf man is found stabbed. She catches just a cryptic phrase or two from the dying victim. His wife proves also to be deaf, as are other persons in the case, so Matti continues to help, to listen, to ultimately and perilously put the pieces together. Quite a readable tale, and Ryder and Shayne are well worth another meeting or two. But the usual foolishness attendant dying messages (which almost always, as here, could realistically have been clear and removed all mystery) has to be tolerated, as, too, the unexplained incompetence of the killing.

Bill Granger's view of Chicago



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in his series about police detective Terry Flynn is notably bleak: the city comes across as desperately, fatally political, with justice only triumphant when some "higher" purpose can simultaneously be served. This is especially true of *The El Murders* (Holt, $16.95). Flynn (whose earlier adventures appeared under the Granger pseudonym Joe Gash) has to contend with the murder of a homosexual, and with the view of some of his colleagues that this constitutes good riddance. Meanwhile, Flynn's friend and fellow detective Karen Kovac is working on a brutal rape and its crushed victim, not knowing that rapist and killer are one and the same. An impressive—and probably realistic—narrative.

Gerald Hammond's latest about Scottish gunsmith-sleuth Keith Calder is *The Worried Woman* (St. Martin's, $13.95). This is rather more tranquil and talky than the best of the series, but the puzzle is well formed and we again have some very nice interactions between Calder and his soon-to-be-beautiful young daughter. The widow of the most thoroughly hated man in the Scottish labor movement does not like the police verdict on her husband's death: suicide. Calder reluctantly agrees to have a look, quickly (with his firearm expertise) turning the official solution on its head. This provokes malice: a threatening phone call, a nocturnal attack. Things are getting out of hand.

Prolific English mystery writer John Buxton Hilton died in 1986, so alas we shall have no more of the delightfully witty tales about Inspector Mosley that he wrote as John Greenwood. *What, Me, Mr. Mosley?* (Walker, $15.95) is the sixth and last. Mosley, whose mind works in eccentric and devious ways foreign to those of his superiors, is rummaging in the village of Bagshawe Broome. Here his sharp eye has spied some stolen property among rummage-sale displays. House squatting and house looting have been going on of late, and Mosley has particular interest in the moldering pile once dwelt in by the late Henry Burgess. Matters progress to kidnaping, and Mosley's boss, Superintendent Grimshaw, comes unglued to add to the general chaos. You could do far worse than settle in with this whole series.

Isidore Haiblum, known heretofore as a science-fiction writer, lands solidly in our firmament with *Murder in Yiddish* (St. Martin's, $17.95). James Shaw, N.Y.C. private eye, stars in this caper, a convoluted affair in which Shaw is kept largely in the dark about practically everything—certainly including the motives of his client. He's hired to watch a crooked ex-cop, and while doing so fails in his rescue from attack of a little old lady living in the shabby tenement he's watching from. When Shaw gets out of the hospital with his largely untreated concussion, he finds that the lady was also watching the ex-cop and has left her account in Yiddish. After this, things get worse for the battered Shaw. Colorful, amusing, and fanciful.

In *McKain's Dilemma* (Tor,



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$16.95), Chet Williamson presents another new private investigator, the troubled and beleaguered Bob McKain, operating out of Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Here he becomes entangled in a surpassingly ugly and violent area, full of homosexuality and AIDS, with a dollop of organized crime. Carlton Runnells, wealthy through carefully arranged marriage, hires McKain to find the man, a New York designer, with whom he spent a night and would like to spend more. McKain, not passing judgment on clients or lifestyles, does as bidden. Murder follows, and McKain—now consumed with the frailties of his own body and once happy family—lets compassion rule his head. To his vast peril. Tense and involving.

Joseph Hansen's latest about L.A. insurance investigator Dave Brandstetter, *Early Graves* (Mysterious Press, $15.95), operates in similar territory, offering a grimly memorable account of the ravages of AIDS among those it most attacks.

A fresh corpse, dispatched by knife and subsequently determined to be dying of the disease, is deposited on Dave's doorstep, apparently the latest work product of a serial killer. This body is that of a real-estate developer, outwardly a happy husband and father. Someone, with knife, takes offense when Brandstetter inserts himself in the proceedings, looking for a common denominator among the victims and their desperate and agonized families and friends.

Peter Marklin, dealer in antique toys, whose gentle occupation has a curious tendency to involve mayhem, returns in Neville Steed's *Die-Cast* (St. Martin's, $15.95). Lana-Lee Churchill, an actress of great beauty, has retired to Dorset, near Marklin's shop. He makes her acquaintance, and that of her repulsive husband, with whom she has unaccountably become reunited. This to the great fury of Adam Longhurst, wealthy landowner and now-displaced Lana lover. When Lana's husband is found murdered and Longhurst is found without alibi, Marklin is determined to stay out. Until Lana asks his help and Scotland Yard's Inspector Blake trolls across Peter's path, dragging bait. Very enjoyable, with toy lore again providing both seasoning and substance.

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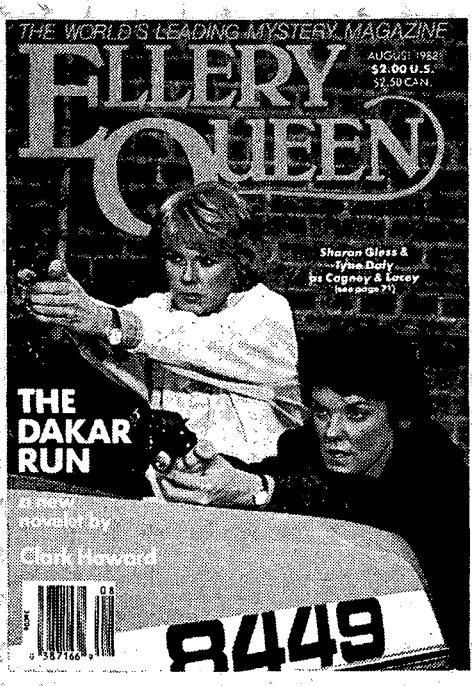


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**a *NEW* Baytown story by**

**WILLIAM BANKIER**

*Over drinks at the Coronet Hotel, Mary said to Jessie, "Harry came up to show me how fast the kitten's growing. We were talking and he told me about his military service in Vietnam. He isn't old enough, surely?"*

*"Harry fantasizes," said his sister. "But he's under the care of a good doctor and it's going to be all right."*

*"I'm glad to hear it." That sounded glib. Why, Mary asked herself, was she trying so hard to alienate the owner of the apartment she lived in?*

*"As for dangerous," Jessie said, gathering up her cigarettes and her lighter and her change, "I'm the one you have to worry about. I'm ten times more dangerous than Harry . . ."*

# HOW DANGEROUS IS YOUR BROTHER?

***by WILLIAM BANKIER***

Mary Lawrence heard a kitten crying as she locked the back door of the radio station after midnight. She found it under a shrub between two parked cars. "Come out of there!" She managed to grasp and lift the fragile creature, exposing china-blue eyes, pink mouth, needle teeth. Its pounding heart overflowed her hand.

"Are you lost? I can't leave you here and I can't go knocking on doors."

Mary headed home on foot, carrying the animal. The apartment she rented was an easy walk from the studios of CBAY. Arriving in Baytown three weeks ago, she had lucked out with her accommodation. There might be a problem if Jessie Hay downstairs ob-

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jected to a cat in her house. But it wouldn't be a major difficulty since Mary didn't intend to keep it.

Watching it lap milk from a saucer, Mary wondered if it could become the station cat. Clement Foy, the chief announcer, would have to give his permission. She had done Clem a favor by working tonight, allowing him to play a gig at The Cedars with his dance-band. They could set up a litterbox in the newsroom. Plates of food and milk could be left in a corner. The cat would probably enjoy being fussed over by the staff.

"Were you abandoned?" Mary asked as the kitten finished feeding and began to explore the apartment, looking for a hiding place. Observing its brave helplessness, Mary experienced a protective urge. Be careful, she warned herself. You just finished with a lame duck up north. A clear image of Tim Melton's handsome, drunken face surfaced in her mind. He was one reason she had left the radio station in Pitfall and moved down here to CBAY. But not the only reason. Her aim was eventually to land a job at one of the big stations in Montreal. Baytown was a step closer.

Mary woke early. The kitten was on the bed. Playing with it and then feeding it was more than satisfying. Her emotional deadline for getting rid of it, she figured, was probably sundown of that day.

Shopping at the market on Front Street, she found herself picking up tins of special food for kittens. And a litter tray and a sack of litter. Interesting implements hung on hooks—flea combs, brushes, flea collars, catnip toys. A trip to the vet for a round of shots would soon be on. Followed, eventually, by the neutering operation. Money going out, diversion of energy and concentration—Tim Melton all over again. Tim oozed charm so that most women wanted to grab him and hold him. But he did exactly as he wished—he was a lot like a cat.

Lining up at a checkout counter, Mary found herself looking at a familiar back. It was Jessie Hay, her landlady, who had a job at the local high school. She was with a young man Mary had never seen before. Jessie turned and saw Mary. Her sharp eyes did an inventory of Mary's shopping cart before she said, "This is my brother. Harry, meet Mary Lawrence, the girl upstairs."

Harry Hay had the family freckles, but fewer of them than his sister. With her ginger hair locked in an excruciating perm, Jessie peered out from behind a screen of the tiny spots. Harry wore his like a spattering of mud on the face of a child. He was a head taller

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than his sister, with darker hair and eyes. His mood was solemn, mouth held slack.

Mary decided to air the situation. "I found a stray kitten last night. I don't intend to keep it. Do you know anybody wants to give a kitten a home?"

Harry clasped his hands and turned to Jessie. "May I have it, Jess? Please?"

"A kitten needs looking after."

"I'll take care of it, you won't have to do a thing. Please, Jess?" Sounding like a schoolboy, Harry seemed to grow in size. He loomed over his sister, who peered up at him with peevish amusement.

"You may as well, if she wants to give it to you."

The Hays drove while Mary walked home, thanking Jessie for her offer of a lift. With all their starting and parking, she was at the house ahead of them. They were loading their groceries in through the kitchen door when Mary came down the back stairs carrying the kitten in her arms.

Harry received it with moans of solicitude, shouldering it against his cheek, murmuring as he bore the animal away, "Little Annabella—little Annabella."

Mary said the obvious. "It's the first I've seen your brother."

"He's been away." Jessie grabbed the last plastic bag from the car and slammed the door.

"In school?"

"Sort of."

That afternoon, Mary ran into Clement Foy in the record library. She was getting together the music for her program, *Town Topics*. Clem was searching out a few disks for his jazz program. "Thanks for covering for me last night," the chief announcer said. Broad-shouldered, in an expensive but ancient suit, and slick-haired, Foy had a kind of silent-screen charm. Not at all bad, was Mary's reaction on first meeting her boss. But he treated her as a valued colleague instead of as dating material. And wasn't that worth a lot more than dinner and dancing?

"You almost got a kitten out of it." She told him about her discovery.

"If you find a stray announcer out there," Foy said, "send him to me. I don't intend to go on handling the night shift."

Mary did her show, fielding some interesting telephone calls, extending the feature on single-parenting, putting together yet an-

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other edition of the best magazine program CBAY had ever produced. After work, she wandered home, picking up some tonic water to dilute the remains of her long-standing bottle of gin.

She was watching the news on one of the U.S. channels from across Lake Ontario when she heard footsteps on the stairs. She got up and opened the door. It was Harry Hay with Annabella clinging to his Viyella shirt. "Look how she's grown," he crowed.

Mary couldn't detect any change in size, although the animal was obviously thriving. "Come in. I was going to make myself a drink. Have one with me."

Harry sipped his gin and hardly took his eyes off the kitten. He was the most soft-spoken, courteous young man Mary had ever run across. It was as if the gods had warned him he would die if he raised his voice. Yes, he told her, he had been away. In Southern California, spending a lot of Jessie's hard-earned money. Los Angeles was a fine place, but to succeed there you needed more energy and talent than he could muster.

Mary asked him why he wanted to work in the United States, anyway—there was all that hassle with Immigration and work permits.

"Because they owe me. Because I volunteered for their Army."

"You were in the American Army?"

"In Vietnam. I lost a lot of friends there." He lowered a finger. Annabella savaged it with four sets of claws. "I still dream about the blood."

Mary was doing some mental arithmetic. The Vietnam conflict had been over for years. "How old are you, Harry?" When he said he was twenty-four, she knew something was wrong. No way he could have been in that war. "You have dreams?"

"Recurring nightmares." He produced his sheepish smile. "Don't worry, I won't describe them. I save all that stuff for my shrink."

To change the subject, Mary asked if Jessie enjoyed her work at the high school.

"She hates it," Harry said calmly. "When you're a student, you can goof off. And you get summer vacations. The principal's secretary is a permanent slave."

Mary contracted cabin-fever around nine o'clock. It was a short walk down Front Street to the Coronet Hotel. The blind pianist was playing jazz in the back lounge, which prompted Mary to look around

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for Clem Foy. He wasn't there, but Jessie Hay was by herself at the end of the bar, pouring a beer.

Mary slid onto the next stool and bought a round. They listened to an airy rendition of "Fools Rush In" that brought them to the brink of tears. Then the piano-man was gone behind the dog with the handle on its back, and they were left with nothing to talk about but life.

Mary led off with ten minutes on her adventures at the radio station. Jessie ate it up and responded with a point-by-point assessment of the high-school principal's incompetence. By this time, Mary was finishing her second G&T, and the bartender seemed to be pouring doubles. During a lull in the conversation, the question just came rolling out.

"How dangerous is your brother?"

Jessie turned her head. She looked at the woman on the next stool for three full beats. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He came up to show me how fast the kitten's growing. We were talking and he told me about his military service in Vietnam. He isn't old enough, surely?"

"Harry fantasizes. But he's under the care of a good doctor and it's going to be all right."

"I'm glad to hear it." That sounded glib. Why, Mary asked herself, was she trying so hard to alienate the owner of the apartment she lived in?

"As for dangerous," Jessie said, gathering up her cigarettes and her lighter and her change, "I'm the one you have to worry about. I'm ten times more dangerous than Harry."

As the Baytown summer sauntered on, Mary worked her shifts and wished she was back home in Montreal. Maybe someday. That year's course in broadcasting at Tennyson Institute in Toronto had promised much, but the reality—working for low wages at the radio station in Pitfall—soon became tedious. Baytown seemed better, but that might be the season.

Harry Hay brought the kitten upstairs every day for a visit. Mary provided drinks after dark, or coffee and biscuits if the sun had not yet reached the yardarm. The young man didn't seem to have a job. One evening when she asked him about work, he said he was starting on a new project, then ran downstairs and returned with three watercolor paintings—explosions of red and orange.

Harry was hanging around another evening when Tim Melton

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showed up unexpectedly. The Pitfall broadcaster arrived with rucksack and bedroll, saying not to worry, he would crash on the living-room carpet. Mary was both annoyed by his brassy intrusion and pleased to see him. Now there would be hours of gossip about the station up north. As for Harry, he responded not only to Melton but to the visitor's effect on Mary. It was as if the disturbed young man's parents had been separated and now they were back together. Their embrace when Tim appeared at the top of the stairs left Harry beaming, his eyes moist.

"Who's your lapdog?" Melton asked when Harry excused himself and took Annabella away.

"I won't have you insulting him. He's my landlady's brother. Tell me about Pitfall."

"I did the entire morning show drunk." Melton's square face carried a few days' worth of dark beard. Unwashed, untrimmed, he had the presence of the scruffy twin who is cleaned up and becomes king. "I adlibbed all the commercials. Duffy's Used Cars was on the telephone, screaming. I read 'Casey at the Bat' with Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* as background music. I called the station manager at half past five—woke him up and put him on the air without telling him."

"It sounds self-destructive to me, Timothy."

"Absolutely. I obviously need somebody to take care of me."

"I wish you luck."

"I was hoping you might get me in at CBAY."

"They don't need anybody." If she told Tim there was an opening, he would clean himself up and get the job. She might find herself slipping back into the relationship she had been so wise to abandon. "You can crash here for three nights. This is the law." She fended off his kiss—feeling none of the old electricity, thank goodness. "Then you have to move on."

"Who's your house guest?" Jessie asked.

Mary was collecting her mail from the box by the front gate. "A former colleague of mine from another station."

"I never allow tenants to bring men into my house." Jessie had been edgy since Mary's unthinking question at the Coronet.

"You didn't say that when I rented the apartment," Mary said. "Come on, Jessie. This isn't Victorian England."

"When is he leaving?"

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"None of your business, really. But I've told him he can stay three nights."

As she headed upstairs, Mary saw Harry watching from the kitchen window. Ten minutes later, he was knocking on her door. "I heard what Jessie said. I want you to know I'm on your side."

"It's a tempest in a teacup, Harry. But thanks."

"My sister can be a monster. She's capable of terrible things. I could tell you stories you wouldn't believe."

"I'm sure you could."

"But I won't let her do anything to you, Mary. I'll stop her if she tries."

Tim Melton did one of his pub crawls through the fleshpots of Baytown and came home after midnight, singing as he fumbled with the gate, falling on the front lawn, and lying there blinking at the moon. By the time Mary got some clothes on and ran down to bring him inside, Jessie was on the scene.

"This is how your colleague comes home?" She was down on one knee, staring down into his jubilant face.

"I've died and gone to heaven," Melton crooned. "It's the face of an angel."

"Get up, Tim," Mary snapped. "It isn't funny."

The drunken announcer used Jessie as a crutch, dragging his weight up and leaning on her as he staggered to the house. "Make my bed soon," his throaty baritone rumbled in her ear, "for I'm weary wi' hunting—"

Jessie relinquished him to Mary at the foot of the stairs. "Three nights, you told me."

"Or less," Mary said grimly.

Tim packed his gear and moved out the next afternoon. "Very cold here in the deep freeze," he said. "You could hang turkeys in this place." He left on foot, heading for the highway and a lift to anywhere.

Jessie knew he was gone before Mary could tell her. She had a way of pronouncing the word "colleague." "Your *colleague* left me a note. He said he's going back to where he came from. Where did you say that is?"

"Pitfall. Up near Thunder Bay."

"I can't see that man apologizing and getting his old job back, can you?"

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"I'm not concerned."

It was going to be difficult to repair the relationship between herself and Jessie. Mary was half inclined to let it end. There were other apartments for rent in Baytown. But this one was comfortable, damn it. And she could walk to work in less than ten minutes.

"When in doubt, do nothing" was one of Mary's axioms and she obeyed it when it suited her. For the next week, she came and went, avoiding Jessie. Harry paid his daily visit with Annabella, who had become a small cat. Then, on a Friday evening, Jessie launched her rocket.

"You'll have to go," she said. "I'm going to need this apartment. Harry will be living up here."

"You can't do that."

"There's no lease. You pay by the week." Jessie avoided Mary's eyes. "I'll give you till next weekend and then I want you gone."

Mary ran downstairs after Jessie to pursue the argument and got the kitchen door slammed in her face. Harry's head was in the window, his eyes disturbed.

At the station on Monday, Mary asked Clement Foy if the landlady could get away with putting her out. He thought she could. "Anyway, since things are unpleasant, why not move?"

"I hate to give in to her, she isn't being fair—but I suppose I'll have to."

But it was Jessie Hay who disappeared from the house on Station Street. And Harry began keeping to himself. For three days, there was none of the normal sound from downstairs. Finally, late on Thursday morning, Mary went to the kitchen door and knocked. It took Harry a while to answer.

"Oh, hi," he said. His eyes were shifting.

"Is everything all right?"

"You bet."

"I haven't seen Jessie in a while."

"That's right." It was as if he was concentrating on saying what Mary wanted to hear.

"She told me to leave. But I don't want to."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said.

"What do you mean?"

"You won't have to leave. I've taken care of it."

"Did Jessie change her mind?"

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"Forget about Jessie. I had some trouble with her." Harry seemed to be sorting himself out. "I've put her in her place."

As Mary concluded her program that afternoon, Clem Foy watched her through the studio window. When she signed off, he came in and said, "What's on your mind?"

"Does it show?" She described Jessie's disappearance and her brother's cryptic comments. "He's so spooky. He's gentle with the kitten, but he has a mind full of violence. He sees a psychiatrist and he's been institutionalized."

"You think he's *killed* her?"

"There's a big garden behind the house. He loves the kitten I gave him. He wants to help me. Yes, I think he's killed her."

"Are you going to tell the police?"

"What's your advice?"

"Tell the police."

Chief Greb's wife listened to *Town Topics* and had raved to her husband about the new broadcaster. Greb took it upon himself to hear Mary's story. He was impressed. "Harry Hay gave us some trouble when he came back from California. He was off his medication. His sister called us in and we ended up driving him down to the Ontario Hospital in Kingston."

"Do you think he may have done something with her?"

The chief came out from behind his desk. "Let's go and find out."

Harry must have seen the police car pull up and park outside. He was in the front doorway as Greb approached with Mary at his heels. "Where's your sister, Harry?"

Harry's eyes darted back and forth between the visitors. "She isn't here."

Mary said, "Are you trying to help me?"

"She shouldn't have ordered you to move out."

Greb said, "I want the truth from you, Harry."

Annabella, rangy now and fast, darted between Harry's legs and out onto the lawn. Harry ran after her. Then, when he was within reach of her, he changed direction. Before the policeman could react, Harry was through the gate and behind the wheel of a battered sedan parked in front of the cruiser. He switched on, pulled out, and raced away up Station Street.

"Stay here," Greb ordered. He left Mary watching as he got into the police car and drove off in pursuit.

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Mary went looking for Annabella—with no luck. She started up the back stairs, then changed her mind. She was too nervous to go inside. What made Harry run? It looked suspicious for him to take off when the chief began questioning him. There was no way he could escape in such a wreck of a car.

The garden behind the house was not well tended. Halfway up the stairs, Mary noticed a clear patch in the tangle of weeds. Somebody had been working there.

The hair stood erect on the back of her neck as she walked through deep grass and stood looking at obvious signs of digging. Fresh earth lay in a mound beside rose bushes run riot. Her heart pounding, she fled to her apartment.

The telephone rang. It was Chief Greb. "I'm at the General Hospital. He's asking for you."

"What happened?"

"I think the kid is suicidal. He drove that wreck faster than it went when it was new. I chased him down 401, almost as far as Napanee. He lost control and went into a concrete overpass. Or maybe he did it on purpose. Can you get here?"

It was too far to walk. Mary called a taxi and arrived at the hospital on Dundas Street within the half hour. Greb was waiting outside Intensive Care. He spoke to a nurse and obtained permission for Mary to go to Harry's bedside.

Harry's head was bandaged and i.v. tubes were taped to both arms. His eyes were closed.

"Harry?"

He recognized her. He smiled. "A whole platoon got through the perimeter in the night," he whispered. "There was a hell of a firefight. Did you get a body count?"

"Not yet." She squeezed his hand. "You sleep now."

Outside in the corridor, she said, "He believes he's been wounded in Vietnam. He's told me stories before."

"Believe it or not, they say he should pull through." Greb said he'd drive Mary home. On the way out of the building, he said, "Having Harry in this condition delays my investigation into his sister's disappearance."

"Lord, I forgot," Mary said. She described the recent digging in the back garden.

The chief said nothing, but on the way to Station Street, he radioed for another car to meet him at the address.

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A younger officer with a shovel made short work of the excavation behind Jessie's house. It wasn't a grave at all—but it did contain some of Jessie's dresses, some costume jewelry, articles of makeup, and a framed photograph of Jessie and Harry taken years ago, all of it buried in a shallow hole.

Mary shivered. "This freaks me more than if Jessie was in there."

"Where the hell is she?" Greb wondered.

Several days went by. The disappearance of Jessie Hay was now a topic of conversation around town. Greb told Mary he was convinced Harry had killed his sister. When he became lucid enough to respond to questioning, he would tell what he had done with her. Mary wasn't so sure. "I think her clothing in the ground is symbolic," she said.

Greb blinked at that and soon made his goodbyes.

Clem Foy asked again about possible candidates to fill the vacancy on CBAY's announcer staff. Mary felt guilty about not recommending Tim Melton, but the feeling lasted only a few moments. She had trouble enough in her life without importing more. And she grieved for Annabella, who seemed to have run off for good.

The house at night was quiet as the grave. When she turned off the television before bed, or popped Berlioz or Dvorak out of the cassette player, there was nothing to be heard except the occasional car passing on Station Street. With her head on the pillow, she could listen to her own heartbeat. The old frame building creaked and settled as the temperature changed. Sleep would come eventually, she would be patient.

The door slammed downstairs. People were moving around. Mary sat up in the dark. She could hear muffled voices. Somebody had got in! There was the scrape of something heavy on the floor—what was that, burglars shifting the stereo? And how long before they decided to come up here?

Mary quietly lifted the bedside telephone, dialed the operator, and asked for the police. She told the answering officer what was happening, adding that Chief Greb was investigating a possible murder up here. The policeman on the line knew all about Jessie Hay's disappearance, and where her home was. He said he'd have a car there fast.

Mary hurried into a sweater and jeans and waited at the top of the back stairs with the door open. An occasional sound from below

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indicated the intruders were still there. When headlights swept the road, Mary crept down the steps and moved around the side of the house to meet the uniformed officer as he got out of the car.

"They've put a light on," she said. "I could still hear them."

"Stay back here." The cop unsnapped the cover on his holster and rested a hand on the butt of his gun as he approached the door and knocked.

"Who's that?" Jessie Hay's voice sounded full of joy. She opened the door. She knew the policeman by sight. "Keith Miller! What's up?"

"Hi, Jessie." The young man was abashed. "We got a report somebody was messing around inside your house."

"And you checked it out. Good for you. And you found it's me." She sounded a little tipsy. "You can be the first to congratulate me, Keith. I'm not Jessie Hay any longer. I'm Mrs. Melton. Meet my husband, Tim."

The door of the police car was open. Mary sank onto the upholstered front seat. Tim was in the doorway, shaking hands with the officer. Miller was giving the bride a kiss, refusing a drink because he was on duty. Mary decided to sneak away upstairs before she could become further involved, but the front door closed and Keith Miller spotted her moving across the lawn as he headed back to the car.

"It wasn't intruders," he said. "Jessie's got married and—"

"I know, I heard," Mary cut him off. "Sorry I brought you out." She went upstairs to bed.

She could have predicted what would happen next. Clem Foy didn't have to come looking for Tim Melton. Since there was only one radio station in town, the newlywed announcer made his way there almost as soon as the confetti was washed out of his hair. With his experience in the business and his abundance of charm, he was hired on the spot.

Encountering Mary in the record library while he was being shown around, he whispered, "You should get more involved in what's happening. You said there were no jobs going here. Clem just told me he's been looking for somebody since April."

On her way up the back stairs later in the week, Mary saw Jessie working in the garden with clippers and mower and rake. Mary got in the first shot.

"Concealing the evidence of Harry's aberration?"

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"My brother was stressed to the max when I told him I might be getting married. His imagination took over and he reacted. Big deal. Anyway, a neat garden will help when I sell the cottage. And you don't have to bother moving. With Harry in the hospital, I don't need the apartment." She went on to say, "Tim tells me you consider him to be the worst thing that's happened to Canadian broadcasting since rock-and-roll."

"Tim's okay."

"He's a diamond in the rough. All he ever needed was somebody to take care of him." Jessie radiated triumph as she bent to her clipping.

She did sell up and move before the end of the year and Mary wasn't affected. An old couple moved in downstairs, and they were delighted to have CBAY's lady broadcaster living in their new house.

Mary didn't see Harry again. He went from Baytown Hospital to a convalescent home for six months, and then to Jessie's new residence on the south shore where there was plenty of room for him.

But she heard his voice. Getting ready for bed one night, she tuned in *Melton's Magic*, the new late-night DJ show Foy had added to the schedule. The music was appealing, she gave Tim credit for that. There was often a guest in the studio. Tim had a flair for scouting out characters who had something to say. Mary propped herself against two pillows with a magazine and a cup of hot chocolate while Tim's resonant voice rumbled out of the bedside radio.

"My guest tonight is a local lad who has been there and back. He admits to suffering long bouts of psychiatric illness. Good therapy and medication have left that in the past. Harry, you once believed you had fought in Vietnam, although you were too young for the war."

"That's true, Tim." Harry's voice sounded equally laid back. From his hospital bed, the little faker had risen to become a media person. "I dreamed of firefights, of being wounded, of losing my friends in battle." Harry went on at length, dissecting his own case as if he were reading from a medical journal.

Mary's eyes became heavy. She turned out the light and snuggled down. But, too fascinated to miss a word of the interview, she left the radio on.

It was much later, and perhaps she had dozed off, when something in Harry Hay's voice caused her to sit bolt upright, awake and shaking.

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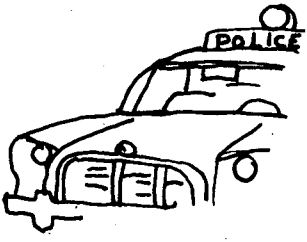
"The sane world isn't much better than the crazy one I used to inhabit," he was saying. "Can you imagine a person sick enough to give somebody a kitten infected with rabies? The giver knowing it and not mentioning it?"

"That's incredible."

"But it's true," Harry said in a tone Mary recognized from before, only it was darker, much darker, than when he'd spoken to her of his sister. "I know a person who did this. Right here in Baytown."

Within minutes, Tim had smoothly ended the interview and eased into some slumber-inducing music. But Mary didn't sleep. Instead, she found herself wondering over and over and over how dangerous Harry Hay really was.

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*Usually broken legs mend easily enough, but Dr. Wells said it was a more complicated fracture, where the bone splinters rather than breaks. Thus the recovery took a long time. It was hard for young Andrew, being so active, and then right afterward there was a very hot spell of weather with no rain for several weeks, which did not help the invalid's temper. Then, of course, Mrs. Wellerby started up with her stories . . .*

# FOLK STORIES

**by MARY REED**

Willows—they use them to beat the boundaries, do they not? An ill-omened tree, if you believe the village gossips. Planting one was, they said, asking for bad luck. Now, of course, they are all saying "Told you so" over their pints at that dreadful public house.

Personally, I've no time for such tales, especially ones founded upon folk stories, such as that willow wands were used to chastise the boy Jesus. Now, if the gossips had pointed out that willows clog drains or are notorious for being prone to pests of all sorts, one could understand the prophesies of doom. One must, after all, be practical. But as I doubt that there were willows in what is now the Holy Land in the first place, I dismiss such tales as nonsense. Had I been planting a tree to mark the adoption of a child, I would have chosen something nice and British—a sturdy oak, for example. Of course, things were exacerbated by the ill-informed prattling of Mrs. Wellerby, the daily help. My tenants are city folk, rather vulgar in their tastes—I understand they chose the willow because they liked the look of it on their tea-service—but they are quiet enough and do seem to look after the house very well.

Of course, the garden is somewhat neglected. In the old days when we had a gardener and three undergardeners, it looked wonderful. Trim lawns. Flowerbeds a blaze of color from spring to autumn—then after that, flowers from the conservatory for my mother to arrange. Fresh vegetables. But one can't get the help nowadays—and even

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if one could, it would be financially impossible to keep things up in the old style.

When I was a girl, the world was very different. I remember when Father and I walked to church villagers would curtsey or raise their caps to us. Nowadays it's all push and shove and being called "luv" at the supermarket. Dreadful, truly dreadful, after a lifetime of "my lady" or "ma'am." Not that I'd like you to think I am a snob. I am not. It is, I admit, rather galling living here in what was the gate-house cottage with tenants in the big house, but I have adjusted to it quite well, I think. In fact, I quite enjoy growing my own lettuce and tomatoes. The people at the house have the occasional party, so I see a few events still held in the grand style, when the big cars and befurred women sweep by my little house.

Mr. Reese is a stockbroker and quite wealthy. It was a pity that his wife could have no more children, for if she could have borne them so much unpleasantness could have been avoided. But I remember that it was very much the same way with Mother. I was the only child, and I've been told that as I arrived she almost departed. She never really recovered her health after that, but she always used to say that it had been worth it to have borne an heir. I have wondered if Father would have preferred a boy to carry on the name, but he never said. He was a man of few words, a gentleman of the old school. I do not have to tell you how much of a field day the gossips had when he eloped with our third undergardener's wife. It caused a scandal which almost killed Mother, and local long tongues still resurrect it now and then when they have nothing better to do.

Needless to say, it not only wrecked our lives but that of the third undergardener, who came to us in tears, offering to resign his post. Of course Mother said he should stay with us—and he did, until his death ten years later.

Mother inspired loyalty, and the third undergardener—his parents had blessed him with the name of Jubal, though he never sang and was said to be tone-deaf—would have done anything for her. Servants could be dismissed for many infractions, some of them apparently quite minor, but we kept ours for years. Very few left us, unless it was one of the maids who was marrying, since married women (except perhaps for cooks) did not usually work in service then. Jubal's wife had been my governess, but she became pregnant. Another scandal in the bud, but when Jubal came to us and said he would like to marry her my parents gave their blessing. She may

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not have loved Jubal, but she married him, if only to avoid her baby being fatherless. But she could not stay under our roof, I need not say—moral ideas were different then, too.

There was more of a sense of social responsibility in those days. Many people laugh at the idea of *noblesse oblige*, but it was a system which worked, and worked well, at a time when there was no welfare state, no National Health Service, nothing for those in reduced circumstances to fall back on. It is ironic, is it not, that here I am in reduced circumstances myself? Though I could certainly have more to contend with, and I do try to be practical.

Practical is not how I would describe Mrs. Reese. She is not what I would call an intelligent person. She seems to be easily swayed and tends to be hysterical. I remember the time when young Andrew, that's the son, fell into the goldfish pond. Instead of running about hysterically, she should have just jumped in and got him. Fortunately, I happened to be passing by on the way to prune the roses and managed to fish him out by the time she arrived from the house—screaming loud enough to wake the dead. She was in such a state that I thought it best not to mention that Jeremiah, the governess's son, had drowned in the pool at the age of three months. A tragedy, to be sure, but if mothers will not watch their young what can one expect?

So really I was not surprised when they chose a willow to honor their son. Where the trouble really began was with Mrs. Wellerby and her ridiculous stories. I've no doubt she rattled on as she dusted around the ornaments—I recall when she worked for me, she never moved any of them and I had to speak to her about it on more than one occasion—though I doubt that Mrs. Reese even noticed the sloppy manner in which Mrs. Wellerby went about her duties. No, I believe she listened to the folk tales and superstitions of which Mrs. Wellerby was full and that they influenced her to the detriment of reason. Why, for example, should the fate of a child be tied to a tree? It is ridiculous. But so Mrs. Wellerby claimed, and no doubt she provided plenty of embroidered stories to support the hypothesis. I had heard a few myself, in fact, though not with patience, but I suppose Mrs. Reese had nothing else to do but listen.

Young Andrew was always a sickly child. He seemed to have one cold after another all winter, and allergies most of the spring and autumn. For all that, I will say, he was quite a strong-willed character—some might say stubborn. I had to speak to him more than once about his running through my annuals, but he still persisted

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in doing it. Even so, and there were other irritations—throwing stones at my cats, for example, and stealing my strawberries—he was, I suppose, fairly reasonable in his behavior as children go. Had he been better behaved, however, he might not have had the accident.

What happened was, one sunny, quiet Sunday afternoon when the weather was fine, I was thinking of doing a little weeding among the vegetables behind my cottage. Young Andrew was running about the place as usual, and having climbed my walnut tree despite a number of admonishments about it from both myself and his parents contrived to fall out of it and break his leg. This was bad enough, but he also ruined, positively ruined, my cucumber frame by landing on it full force.

Now, usually broken legs mend easily enough, but Dr. Wells said it was a more complicated fracture—of the type known as greenstick, or is it greenspan? The bone splinters rather than breaks. Thus the recovery took a long time. It was hard for him, I think, being so active, and then right afterward we had a very hot spell of weather with no rain for several weeks, which did not help the invalid's temper, or anyone else's for that matter. I noticed that Mrs. Reese had become very pale and thin, probably from sitting up all night with Andrew, especially when his leg got infected and he became really sick. I sent up some of my best peaches for him, but he did not have the appetite for them, which surprised me, considering how many he had stolen in previous summers.

Then, of course, Mrs. Wellerby started up with her stories, and Mrs. Reese swallowed the whole hodgepodge. At least this is the only explanation I can offer for subsequent events.

Andrew had been confined indoors for about two months by then—in fact, *none* of us had seen him for a couple of weeks, I recollect. He probably found it more comfortable inside away from the heat, as we all did. My garden was in a sad way, browning almost visibly despite all the watering I gave it, and the trees were drying out, too, as was the lawn. It would have broken Jubal's heart to see it—broken patches all over it. And the water-loving willow suffered the most. Despite constant watering, it drooped and drooped and looked ready to give up the ghost. Now, Mr. Reese had always scoffed at Mrs. Wellerby's superstitions—had, in fact, been very vocal about them at the West Wind, so I heard—thus, when they decided to, if you will believe this in our day and age, replace the willow with *another*, fresher specimen, they were virtually forced

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to do it at midnight in order to avoid anyone seeing them. How do I know? Two reasons. Firstly, I took delivery of the new willow—not without much protest, I can tell you—and secondly, I happened to be sitting on the porch when I saw them come out of the house. I often sit out there late at night, when it's cooler.

They got spades from behind the rose bushes and began digging. Although they could not be seen from the village, they kept looking furtively around as if they were up to no good. I have no doubt that this is what attracted the attention of William Lee, walking along the road on the way back to his cottage—although I personally would like to know what he was doing out at midnight when the last bus from town gets in at eight in the evening. Poaching, like as not. Anyway, he saw the Reeses digging, and in the manner of the locals immediately invented some fantastic tale of Andrew being disposed of for his money (which he did not possess, I may say)—and, having invented it, acted upon it. That is, he rushed off to tell the local constable about something odd at the big house.

Well, as you know, the constable got reinforcements and, along with half the village, came to see what was going on. Naturally, the Reeses were dreadfully embarrassed by the whole thing, but explained that they had had the idea of replacing the tree with a healthier one so that young Andrew would get better.

Curiously, nobody laughed at the idea. As I said, these old superstitions are rooted deeply in the countryside—I do not make puns—so nobody thought anything of it. Or if they did, they agreed with it. In fact, Constable Collins helped plant the new tree.

Or, rather, began to. In digging a new hole by the rose bushes, he turned up some bits of bone, and you know the rest of the story. Social responsibility was very strong in those days, but people believed in *noblesse oblige*—which did not include running off with governesses. The bones were, of course, those of Father and Jubal's wife.

Any theory about it, you ask me? Well, it could have been Jubal, strong from laboring in the garden, who did it. Or Mother, though weak and in ill-health, might have used poison. But it was Jubal, I'm sure, who buried them there, and said nothing. As I mentioned, servants were loyal then—perhaps not only from love of the family, but also because new positions were hard to find. After all, they had to be practical. A willow will always weep, but a man must eat. And Jubal was nothing if not practical.

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a ***NEW*** **short story by**

**ALLAN LLOYD**

*"You know something of what happened here?" Ti asked.*

*"No," the man said. "I was only thinking that Mr. Keng was surprised halfway through his work. See? Look there. He always moved in the same direction. The proper one. From south to north."*

*"But what was he doing?" the magistrate wondered.*

*The man's brown hand pointed to the narrow trail, to a line of broad footprints. "Only what he did every day of his life. He was wiping out the footprints."*

*Note, those readers who are dyed-in-the-silk detective-story aficionados, that this story, set in China during the T'ang dynasty, makes fictional use of the acclaimed real-life detective, Ti Jen-chieh (630–700), the same magistrate on whom Robert van Gulik based his fictional Judge Dee . . .*

# THE MAN WHO WIPED AWAY FOOTPRINTS

***by ALLAN LLOYD***

Magistrate Ti Jen-chieh chose to enter the city of Wei through one of the southern gates because this was not an official visit, and because he sometimes felt the need to watch again the crowding colors of the common people.

It was a fine day for it, a light-yellow day in the spring of the first year in the Lin-te reign, A.D. 664. The magistrate had come to the capital of Ho-pei Province with the minimum of mounted retainers in order to help settle a minor death in one of the more distant branches of his father's family. It was a duty that might have been

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met by any cousin or uncle, nothing that should have cost Magistrate Ti half a week's stay in an uncertain saddle, yet, if the truth were told, his visit had less to do with his relation, whom he had never known, than with his own springtime dissatisfaction with the desk-bound tedium of his judicial office. He was still an energetic man in his middle thirties, who suffered every time he sensed a peculiar new experience passing him by unappreciated or a missed insight into people and their ways. What good was a judge who knew only the outside of everyday passions and fears? The magistrate yearned to see as much of raw life as he could, and from every level.

This yearning was what had moved him to lead his company halfway around the walled city, even though as an imperial official he would be lodging in the nobler northern sector. It would be among these poorer neighborhoods in the south that he could find some of the noise and stench that his position too often isolated him from—the screaming vegetable hawkers, the itinerant jugglers, the beggars from faraway parts. Nothing, he knew, could ever take the place of the wisdom of basic human experience. Of course, it would never do for a man in his position to be seen too dirtily mixed with the howling people of the street—which was why he separated from his retinue just inside the south city gate and rode by himself toward the house of his relations in the eastern sector. This way, too, he could see the city less conspicuously and spare the family the bother of having to welcome a clumsy band of horses and men.

He rode on slowly, not only to see everything the better, but because he was not entirely sure where he was headed. He guessed the house must be in or near a neighborhood for artisans, because his father's relation had started his career as a wheelwright. He was said to be very rich now, very proud and powerful—the kind of man to whom the loss of a wife would be as the loss of a well used saw. The magistrate was not expecting any great show of grief, as he was not expecting any honest outpouring of welcome, but he was curious to see something of this isolated offshoot of his widespread family and to make contact with yet another part of his past. And finally, perhaps most importantly, Magistrate Ti knew it was his duty to represent his branch of his father's family at this grieving house, no matter how many befuddling and exasperating turnings he might have to take to get there.

He and his horse at last managed to reach an eastern ward of the city, where an island of greens and blues shimmered in the midst of yellows and browns. A narrow ridge of land between jumbled

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streets and the city wall had been given over or abandoned to a tuft of a park, a modest stand of stately bamboo and grass surrounding a slight glimpse of a pond. There were breezes here and cool colors and an unlikely privacy that made the nearby markets seem far away. At the farther end of the park could be seen a suggestion of rising stone, a line of trail climbing up it toward a poor hut made of bound reeds. There, shifting among the emeralds of the day's light, a low-lying commotion of dust blurred the distance.

The magistrate had just stopped his horse and raised himself to look about when he heard a shuffle of hurrying legs pursuing him from behind. Five or six men were rounding a corner, their sandaled feet churning.

"Is there one among you," he called out as they passed, "who will direct me to the Street of Ten Thousand Ruts?"

No one answered him, but there was something in their strained faces that moved him to kick his horse forward into a trot that took him through the park almost at their heels. He didn't pull up until he had almost reached the door of the small hut.

An uneasy knot of people had clotted together there, the mix of the curious and the cruel and the idle that can be found near any public tragedy. Magistrate Ti lowered himself heavily to the ground and worked his way forward, excusing himself as he went.

What the crowd had gathered to see was a sad shell of a man lying twisted and oddly stiffened in the yellow dust of the path. Short and poor and weak, he seemed to have been caught and frozen in the act of running frantically, but horizontally, along the ground. What seemed most pathetic to the magistrate were the man's scarred feet, tumbled out of their sandals as if he had been a child just learning to walk. In his right hand he held a broom made of straw tied at the end of a stick. At his head, almost as if it were cradling his head like a pillow, lay a broken earthenware bowl, filling even as the magistrate approached with the flowing color of the dead man's blood.

"What has happened here?"

The magistrate had no power or connections in Wei, so he bothered to identify himself to no one, but the weight of his voice in the silence of the park was enough to start everyone talking at once.

"He's only just been found!"

"He must have been struck as he was at his daily work!"

"A man's passions come back to hound him, to make him pay some back—I told him so myself more than once!"

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Magistrate Ti bent down to study the man's darkened face, then straightened up to question the crowd. "Has no one been sent to summon the ward officials?"

After some confusion, a pair of boys was persuaded to run off for help. The magistrate, suddenly short of breath, found himself wishing they might take forever. "Who is this man, then? Does anyone know?"

A drunken voice separated itself from the mass of the growing crowd. "It's Mr. Keng, isn't it? I know his broom. Yes, the man that's lived in this hut here from when I wasn't much more than a boy."

Suddenly, almost magically, everyone found something in the figure curling upon the ground that made it as recognizable as a brother.

"Of course, with that bit of hair on his head just like those trees behind his hut!"

"Where's his wife, then?"

Heads turned and turned and someone said: "There she comes—walking from her day's shopping."

Looking over the huddled crowd, the magistrate saw a frail woman hobbling beneath a prickling bag of vegetables. He quickly sent another woman to meet her and prepare her for the news. Then he turned to a straight-standing man, grave and clean in simple clothes, who was staring at the corpse and nodding to himself as though now he understood everything. "You know something of what has happened here?" Magistrate Ti asked him in a low voice.

"Myself? No," the man said flatly, "I was only thinking that he was surprised halfway through his work. See? Look there. He always moved in the same direction. The proper one. From south to north."

"But what was he doing?" the magistrate wondered.

The man's brown hand pointed to the narrow trail, to a line of broad footprints. "Only what he did every day of his life. He was wiping out the footprints."

Standing in the golden-green of the park, his robe hanging cool in a stray breeze, the magistrate was about to ask the man why when he remembered something. "Of course! Master K'ung—"

"That's right," the straight-backed man said, pleased. He stepped closer to the magistrate and the dead man as the crowd exchanged their theories among themselves. "You remember some of the old stories that were told about Master K'ung, about Confucius, about some of the troubles he ran into in his day. No one wanted him around to tell them how badly they were living their lives or running

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their states, so in place after place they threw him and his men out of town." The man dropped his voice and added in confidence: "I can't say I blame them much. Who wants some impractical bore coming around to preach to them when he can't find an honest job to feed his own belly?"

Not hearing the impiety, Magistrate Ti was thinking aloud. "Of course. They attacked him between Ch'en and Ts'ai, troubled him in Shang and Chou, chopped down a tree on him in Sung, and drove him out twice from his home state of Lu." He looked down at the rumple of clothes at his feet. "And wiped out his footprints here in Wei."

The straight man nodded with some excitement, absently nudging the body with his toe. "Right! And Mr. Keng here, with his broom still in his hand, being the ardent follower of Master K'ung that he was, took it upon himself these many years ago to avenge the humiliation done to his school by doing the same to the trail of anyone passing by his hut—a harmless enough hobby, really. None of us in this ward thought him dangerous or lunatic. We admired his zeal, in fact. He was a fine scholar in his own way—of the Confucian classics only, you understand. But he harmed no one by what he did. Only himself, by taking everything too much to heart."

A growing keen interrupted them, as the dead man's wife drew closer to seeing and believing. The magistrate ignored her, frowning over the scribble of marks in the dust and the perfect work of erasing that the dead man had half completed.

"A very large man," said Ti.

The footprints were flat and broad and pointed north. Each of the toes was vague in outline, as if nothing truly separated them from one another, or as if they were only five knobs in a single block of hard flesh. They were almost a hand's length in breadth, made by a man of monstrous proportions, yet curiously shallow. As far as the magistrate could see, they extended only to the point where the trail gave way to rockier fields and finally to the first streets of another ward of the city. He gazed into the warm haze and dust north of the park.

"I wonder where he was headed, the man who made these footprints?"

Again, the straight-backed man was at his side and helpful, pointing out a dingy house on the verge of a running ditch. "Toward that place there, if you want me to tell you. Toward the house where the man that did this lives."

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Subtly, the magistrate maneuvered the man backward to the edge of the path, out of everyone else's hearing. "Tell me what you mean to say."

The man moved his shoulders. "Well, you can see for yourself, can't you? Only look at the rest of the bowl he's resting his head in. It's one of those begging-bowls, the kind made of stone that the Buddhists always travel about with. Now we both know that there's no love between the Confucians and the Buddhists. Never has been, am I right?" He poked in the direction of the dilapidated house. "And who do you think lives there where the toes of these prints are pointing but one of the most disagreeable Buddhists that Heaven ever meant to curse us with?"

The magistrate looked at him sharply. "And the two of them had argued before?"

"When didn't they?" the other man snorted. "As fierce as thunder, the two of them! And Mr. Keng here always came out the loser—the other man has the louder voice!"

As a rabble of men and horses began to approach the park from the nearest neighborhood, Magistrate Ti dropped quickly to his knees to examine the ground about the body. He didn't take long, because he knew that the city officials would be arriving in a moment to take charge of everything. He peered and hummed and wagged his huge head, then squinted lower to pick at something embedded within an unswept footprint. It was a common insect that he finally raised to his eyes, a smashed and forgotten insect.

"Come and introduce me to this ghastly Buddhist of yours, will you?"

The straight-backed man easily outdistanced the magistrate, not only in youth and vigor but in his sheer eagerness to get to the Buddhist's house and start the questioning. Magistrate Ti caught up with him at the broken gate that led through a rotting garden to the faded house. An unhappy dog followed the two men to the door, hanging about, hoping for scraps until the door was opened and a bone was tossed out. It was followed by a man's face, wide with interest and a voice that rawly invited them in with a shout.

Magistrate Ti studied the room in which he found himself with despair. It was even more bare than the dog's bone. The walls were decaying with time, the ceiling was uncertain, and the floor was crowded with little more than dirt and emptiness. A stack of worn

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mats for sitting stood crookedly in one corner and the Buddhist walked immediately toward it, roaring and flailing his arms. "You'll want some places to seat yourselves, gentlemen. I am a perfect host or I am nothing." He spun about and flung the cushions at them. "Here—take, take, take!"

Shaken to the hem of his robe by the man's blunt impropriety, the magistrate could do nothing but stare. The Buddhist was a round and healthy man, of only average height but of great density, his limbs and chest and shoulders massed with muscle and overgrown with hair. His voice swelled the room and the movements of his eyes seemed to leave nothing unseen. Even the coarse smell of his body was a presence among them. Ti sat down doubtfully upon a shaggy mat and glanced at his host's bare feet. They were broad and spatulate, as flattened as one of his own cushions.

The helpful neighbor from the park made introductions, and Magistrate Ti acknowledged his indebtedness to Mr. Liu Ch'a for his hospitality. The Buddhist scrabbled idly about behind a screen for a while, searching awkwardly for tea or wine, then he gave it up and came to squat down facing his guests. His bristling brows and eyes made his face appear larger than human, more startled than a man gone suddenly deaf. He must have been in his late thirties, no more, but the magistrate thought he had to be the most truly ageless man he had ever seen.

"You will have heard by now," Ti said, "of the sad death of your neighbor, Mr. Keng."

The Buddhist changed his face, but only a very little. "I haven't," he said levelly. "But I pass only rarely outside these poor walls. Most of my work is done within."

The magistrate focused upon the man sitting coldly before him and felt that he was looking at dead wood. "I have no real power here in Wei, but it grieves me deeply to see a harmless man and a good one struck down as he went about what he believed to be his sacred duty."

The Buddhist opened his hands helplessly toward the ceiling. "Life and death are grave matters, are they not? And the second follows the first as swiftly as nightfall." He smiled placidly. "What's a man to do?"

"You yourself knew Mr. Keng, of course."

"Of course. What two men can live so close to one another and not meet? They might see each other, one might be stopped walking by the other, they might fall to talking together—"

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"And when you talked together, Mr. Liu, were you of one mind or two?"

Strangely, the magistrate was having trouble keeping the form of the Buddhist clearly present before him. The man was calm and self-possessed enough, tranquil as glass, but there was an added resonance in him that seemed to unsettle the balance of the entire room. It was almost as if he were somehow sitting behind himself and smiling, laughing in secret at the magistrate's clumsy efforts to make him declare himself and confess. "We screamed at one another lustily and to no effect, each trying to awaken the mind of the other to some kind of sense. The devotees of Master K'ung, you know," he added patiently, "are often victims of their own bothersome, excessive activities."

Glancing neutrally about the drab room, Magistrate Ti asked, "And which school do you follow yourself, Mr. Liu?"

The Buddhist dropped one hand to the floor and rested his fingertips upon it. "I studied for many years at Mount Shuang-feng, first with Master Tao-hsin and then with Master Hung-jen. The one taught me how to sit long and say nothing and the other taught me how to think and read the *Chin-kang ching*, the *Diamond Scripture*."

"Did neither of them teach you how to beg?"

This was the question that finally moved the straight-backed man, who had been sitting on the edge of everything, to sigh audibly with satisfaction.

"Beg, did you say?" The Buddhist looked about him and frowned. "Well, I do sometimes, but only when the need is very keen."

"And the first thing you must need," Ti pressed gently, "is some kind of bowl for your alms." He raised his eyebrows at the naked room. "Has something become of yours, might I ask?"

The three men sat silent for a moment. A bustle of movement echoed distantly from the park.

Plainly worried now, the Buddhist said: "I don't know what you mean to say, but there's been no one here since this morning. And that was only when the woman came to take my robes to clean."

"You must have carried it out yourself, then?"

"When I went where?"

"You must have moved outside at least once today," the magistrate said.

"Motion does not move," Liu Ch'a intoned profoundly. "You can see for yourself," he said, gesturing toward the frayed screen, "that my sandals are free from dust."

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To everyone's surprise, Magistrate Ti rose and stepped over to the screen. There he found a single pair of homemade sandals, unevenly and grotesquely carved from flat blocks of wood. Ti picked them up and turned them over. Their bottoms were knotted and scarred and strangely shaped, almost as if the scuffed marks of them across shallow dust would mimic the shuffle of a bare foot. Swaying uncertainly where he stood, the magistrate could not decide if what he had seen on the path had been the prints of feet or the prints of sandals fashioned to look like feet—or perhaps neither. He grumbled in frustration. Then he looked again at the soles of the sandals and saw on one of them part of a killed insect, shining and blue, stuck by its own blood to the wood. He set the sandals down, wiping their dust from his hands.

"It's not good for any man," he said softly to the Buddhist, "to spend too much of his time out of the sun's light."

"The external world has nothing to do with me, nor I with it," Liu answered peacefully, though his face was creased. "Have you never noticed, Magistrate Ti, that the real sky is never revealed until all the birds have flown out of sight?"

As the magistrate lowered himself to the mat again, the doorway trembled with the shadow of a young woman entering behind an armful of sodden clothes. She was dark and small, lovely as rich wood, and the first appearance of her face was of eager happiness. When she saw the magistrate and the neighbor seated in front of Liu Ch'a, the joy left her face and she almost let the clothes drop.

"Just go about what you need to do, Miss Li," the Buddhist said kindly. "Don't mind us."

She began to wander numbly toward the screen when Ti stopped her. "Whereabouts did you wash this man's clothes today, girl?"

"In the ditch, sir, where I always do."

"And does that lie in the direction of the park?"

"The opposite," the straight-sitting man put in.

The girl nodded.

"And where do you live yourself?" the magistrate went on.

"On the—on the other side of the park."

Ti stared at her for a time, at her dark hand feebly stroking the Buddhist's robes as if they were sleeping children. Then he waved at the man of the house. "You must have come here early this morning. Did you see this man then?"

"He was still sleeping," she said.

"Was that before or after he left the house?"

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The Buddhist started to say something, but Magistrate Ti shut his mouth with a glance.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," the girl wavered. "Mr. Liu didn't go out this morning. He never goes out."

"But did you actually see him sleeping this morning?"

"Well—" She looked at her master, then away. "He always leaves his robes for me at the door. The room was dark. I thought I could hear him breathing."

"But tell me," the magistrate insisted, "did you really see him?"

The girl looked uncomfortably at her bare feet and hesitated. She seemed so young and confused that anyone watching her must have thought her next words would sound fragile in the hollow room. Yet when she did reply, her voice was thin and polished as a sword-blade, colder than stone.

"No."

Her saying it changed everything all at once, and the raw chill of it darkened the corners of the room. The magistrate could feel the subtle shifting of the moral weight surrounding him. The girl had done what she could. She had tried her best to protect her master, but she had been unable to brazen it out to the end, and now she stared at the Buddhist as if he were far away.

Ti said: "And can you tell me, Miss Li, precisely how long you have been in love with Mr. Liu here?"

The man of the house shouted and began to stand, but it was on the girl that the magistrate kept his attention. She should have wilted delicately in a curling of shame, or at the very least protested in virtuous anger at the suggestion, but instead she stood still as ice and looked at the Buddhist with an iron hatred.

"When a young woman gives her heart away," the magistrate said, "she seldom chooses as well as she should. She chooses the merchant instead of the hardy farmer, the craftsman instead of the respected teacher. She follows visions of romance that have nothing to do with what is proper for her, what is expected of her. And sometimes she gives her love in secret, to one who could never return it."

The standing girl, still holding the wet robes, and the again seated man tried to look at each other without looking, two children who had been planning a forbidden game together. Magistrate Ti watched them, and when he continued he gradually concentrated more upon the girl, and his voice grew harder.

"I have always tried to be fair in my thoughts and words con-

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cerning the ideas of others. There are enough schools of thought for us all, and each man should be allowed to choose his own." He turned to Liu Ch'a. "Now, your way of thinking, sir, seems to leave out more than it lets in. You sit your life away here in this room, never allowing anyone near. You know much about your own mind, but you don't know the least thing about anyone else's. Here you have a young woman washing your clothes every day and she is nothing more to you than one of these cushions. This is not only an inhuman way to live, Mr. Liu, it can also be very dangerous."

"What are you saying?" The Buddhist tried not to see the girl.

"I am saying that a woman whose one passion is turned away will soon find another, perhaps a fouler one, to consume her." The magistrate asked the girl: "Was this the first man you ever loved?"

She hesitated a time before she answered.

"No, he was the only."

"So you would have no understanding of what he could not give you, of those ties of love that his philosophy teaches him are only ties of suffering. Is there any bitterness," the magistrate reflected aloud, "greater than the bitterness of being ignored?"

In the awful quiet of the room, she whispered: "He never looked at me. Never."

"Then look at each other now!" Magistrate Ti rasped, while the neighbor stared at the girl, then at Liu, wholly lost. "Look at each other: the man without a man's body and the woman who schemed to have his body separated from his head!"

"What?" the Buddhist choked.

"You came here twice this morning, didn't you, Miss Li?"

"No," she murmured.

"The second time was for the robes, but the first time—very early—was for the sandals and the earthenware bowl, am I not right?"

"No."

"It must have been at first light when you carried the sandals and bowl past Mr. Keng's hut to the still-deserted southern end of the park. There, you must have fitted your own feet into the shoes, scuffed back northward, taken them off again, and walked back barefoot off the path to wait for the Confucian to come out with his broom. Then you broke the bowl over his head and hurried back here to replace the sandals and start your daily work, assured that the bowl and the footprints pointing here would be more than enough

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to pay this man back for his uncaring. This is how it happened, isn't it?"

"No."

"There is no other possible interpretation!"

Miss Li stood and flinched, shaken, but her eyes and face were dry. It was as if a long, brooding hurt had scorched most of the womanhood out of her. She fought back one last time. "And why couldn't everything have been done as you said by Mr. Liu himself?"

In answer, Magistrate Ti reached into his robes and brought out something small and diaphanous that he held out to show them. A stray spark of the yellow afternoon light outside entered and glanced in a prism off the lens of a shattered wing. He was holding the minute half of an insect.

"The blue *ying* fly," he said with reverence. "The very same that was praised in our *Book of Songs* so long ago. I found this in one of the marks near the body of Mr. Keng. The other half of it, or another half of another, may be seen on the bottom of one of the sandals over there. The fly had been stepped on, cruelly and without thinking, as I myself would step on stones."

The girl did not understand. Neither did the neighbor.

The magistrate exhaled. "Don't you see? Those footprints—made by sandal or by foot—could never have been made by Mr. Liu here. It is not in him. Oh, I suppose some Buddhist might be moved by a great anger to take the life of a rival, but nothing could ever let him kill through sheer carelessness the living beings of the road beneath his feet. This is why so many of them will carry along an alarm-staff to scare off small animals or a broom to sweep ants aside from their path. I imagine this accounts, too, for the strange shape of Mr. Liu's sandals—flat and broad, so that he can slide through the dust instead of stepping. If you had only understood this, Miss Li, you would never have robbed Mr. Keng of his only life for nothing greater than a woman's meaningless jealousy."

She looked at Liu then, at the unspeaking man she had followed with her eyes and thoughts for so many days, and her face became the face of a child who meets death for the first time with fury and despair.

"Him and his sitting and his thinking and his closing his eyes to hum! He thinks of nothing, he believes in nothing! He looked through me as he looked through paper screen. And you!" she turned to the magistrate. "What makes you think him so devout? He doesn't even pray!"

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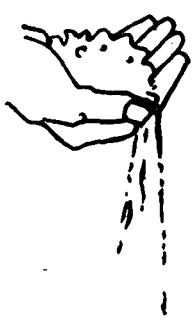
"Miss, I meant he has lost his orthodoxy," Ti told her. "I did not mean he has lost his mind."

A shadow appeared in the yellow doorway then, that of an official from the city's own magistrate, but the girl saw nothing. She was staring down at the robes finally dropping from her hands, trying to feel a certain texture she could never hope to grasp.

The straight-backed neighbor walked Magistrate Ti back through the park, leaving him wordlessly just before they reached the dead man's hut. There was no one else about. The authorities of Wei had come for the body and the wife, and the crowd had dispersed to return to the workday that was hurrying ahead without them. They had left the path pocked and scarred with the erasures of curiosity and confusion, so that all that could be made out now was a blur of footprints and a haze of yellow dust.

Ti looked around at the lifeless hut, at the sparkling park, at the busy clatter of work and play in the surrounding streets where already the people were forgetting. There was a ghostly loneliness in the air that preserved the scene and he felt suddenly that no matter how long he stood here, the sun would not move overhead.

Then he saw, rolled aside beneath a bush, the Confucian's crude broom. After a long moment, he bent to pick it up and then bent again to begin sweeping. It took him a long time to wipe away the intruding, disrespectful footprints of the citizens of Wei, but when he finally set the broom aside, its handle waiting for the next pair of hands, the path was as clear and new as if it had lain unbothered for over a thousand years.



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a ***NEW*** short story by

## JAMES POWELL

*Be prepared to be reminded of a story by Robertson Davies we published last December—but only in the fate that befalls young Count Sonderborg in this enchanting new tale by James Powell. Be prepared to feel the greatest compassion for young Count Sonderborg.*

*"Tell the royal nitwit to stop pestering my goddaughter," said Donnabella through clenched teeth. "Tell him to waltz right on by if he runs into her at another ball. Tell him I've got bigger and better plans for her."*

*"Maybe we should let the young lady decide that for herself," answered Sonderborg sharply. He regretted his tone at once, for Donnabella's eyes flashed fire and her wand appeared from behind her back, making runic notations on the air as it came. The light tap sent a cold, electric thrill through Sonderborg's body.*

*Suddenly his shoulders slumped violently down into a terrible stoop while his knees rocketed up past his ears. Donnabella and the doorway were looming high above him now. Deep inside him, from the very depths of his soul, a small hard bubble was making its way upward toward the light and growing as it came. Though he struggled with all his might to repress it, the bubble crowded up into his mouth, bulging out his cheeks and the skin below his chin. He fought to hold it back, refusing to make the admission the bubble demanded. Suddenly he couldn't hold out any longer.*

"Rivet!" *he boomed . . .*

"Q"



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# MIDNIGHT PUMPKINS

## *by JAMES POWELL*

When Crown Prince Hugo (may his father live forever!) felt the need to strike a regal pose, he liked to ape one of the ancestral likenesses hanging in the Royal Portrait Gallery. Shutting the door on the ballroom noises, he looked left and right for eavesdroppers and lay a much-ringed finger alongside his nose in imitation of his grandfather, King Secundus II, whom history has nicknamed the Terrible Twos. It was an impersonation weakened by poor posture. Young Count Sonderborg, who was cursed with tidiness, fought the urge to grab the prince by the shoulders and straighten him as one might a crooked picture on the wall.

"An orange carriage, Sonderborg," said Prince Hugo, resuming his story. "Footmen in green livery. A grey-whiskered coachman who shouted the team of white horses out the gate with a thick Skandahoovian accent. But in her coy, girlish flight from us, our mystery girl lost this on the palace steps." Prince Hugo drew a glass slipper from inside his starred tunic. "Find her for us, Sonderborg. Your prince will marry no other."

"Might I suggest the traditional kingdomwide trying on of the slipper, Your Highness?" asked Sonderborg.

Prince Hugo assumed the startled, umber-colored expression of King Guido, the Ever-Unexpecting, as the artist Clementi captured him with one leg in the royal trousers. "But if word got out she'd run away from her Crown Prince, people would say she was insane, unfit to bear royal children," insisted the prince. "That's why we turn to you, Sonderborg. You are discretion itself. Nor are we unaware that your family has fallen on hard times." (Sonderborg's grandfather had lost everything speculating in magic bean futures of the Jack-and-the-Beanstalk strain just before such things were outlawed by the Omnibus Magic Bill.) "Succeed in this task and we will make you master of one of our country estates. We had in mind Fen House. Do you know it?"

The prince's perfectly shaped smile slipped a notch at Sonderborg's affirmative bow. "True, the grounds could stand a dose of drainage,"

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the prince admitted. "But don't forget, you'll also have your sovereign's gratitude when we inherit the throne."

"May your father live forever, Your Highness," prayed Sonderborg earnestly.

"Of course, of course," replied Prince Hugo with considerably less enthusiasm.

Because the Crown Prince's Ball was still in full swing, Sonderborg, who had come with friends in their carriage, decided to walk back the few miles to the city. The promise of Fen House made him anxious to begin. For years now, he had been secretly engaged to that soul of patience, the Lady Cunegunda, a plump, ever-smiling little thing with chestnut eyes. Whatever Fen House's shortcomings, finding the mystery girl would reinscribe the Sonderborg name on the roll of the landed gentry, removing her father's main objection to the marriage.

The count left the castle on foot, stepping out hopefully with a healthy red slice of moon riding ahead of him just above the treetops. His initial examination of the glass slipper had convinced him that it shouldn't be too difficult to trace. It wasn't blown glass, because there was no pontil mark which the blower's pipe would have left behind. Nor was there a seam, which meant it hadn't been molded. So the slipper had to have been made by magic. What else was left? And that meant he could expect help from his old college friend, Inspector Rinaldo, who headed up the Magic Squad, the department charged with keeping the kingdom safe for the free-enterprise system by tying the can on illegal magical practices. After all, free enterprise rang hollow if one guy had a genie out of a bottle working for him gratis while the next guy was paying union scale. And sound currency would be a joke if enchanted horses were allowed to sneeze doubloons or certain hens laid golden eggs, or there really existed that fabled credit card ("Don't leave Never-Never Land without it!") whose holders are never, never billed.

Before Sonderborg had walked far, he came upon a hollowed-out pumpkin lying by the side of the road. Smiling, he looked around quickly to see if anyone was watching and was all set to dropkick the thing into the bushes when he noticed a fat, thickly bespectacled man in light-grey tweeds sitting in a tree right above his head. To cover his embarrassment, the count asked, "Excuse me, sir, but did a young woman in an orange carriage pass by a few minutes ago?"

The man blinked. "Who?" he asked, dabbing at his lips with a red-

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and-white-checkered napkin. Then he hiccuped loudly and something silver flashed in the moonlight. Sonderborg stooped and picked up what, except for its very small size, appeared to be a button such as liveried footmen wear. When he looked up again, the tree was empty and the fat man was disappearing through the forest, running on silent tiptoe, his short arms outstretched and dipping now to this side, now to that, like a boy playing airplane.

Sonderborg watched him go with a thoughtful eye.

In his youth, Inspector Rinaldo's grandfather and the grandfather's six brothers had been changed into swans by a grudge enchantment. Their sister broke the spell by weaving each brother a coat of nettles, but unhappily failed to complete the grandfather's right sleeve within the time prescribed. As a result, all his descendants, including Rinaldo, had a white swan's wing where a right arm should have been. Small wonder the Inspector hated magic in all its forms.

When Sonderborg reached police headquarters, he found the corridors filled with men armed with fire axes, battering rams, and buckets of wet cement. Rinaldo explained that though the Omnibus Magic Act had outlawed wishing wells years before, certain bootleg operations still operated—mainly basement sump holes where, if you knew the password, they'd let you in to toss a coin or two and make your wish. Tonight the Magic Squad was going to close down these dens of illegality. But Rinaldo could always spare an old friend a minute.

He held the glass slipper up to the light with his good hand and said, "Fairy-godmother stuff for sure, Sondy. You know the drill. *There's this kid moping around because he can't make the prom.* Enter his fairy godmother in a shimmer of harp. One wave of the wand and, voila, his acne clears up and he's sporting a spiffy new tux, fat cat's-eye cufflinks, and a pair of official Fred Astaire dancing pumps. Yes, Sondy, the powers-that-be knew making fairy-godmother stuff illegal would be like shooting Santa Claus. So they framed the law so that fairy godmothers can work their magic only if they derive no financial profit—the formal-clothes-rental people made them put that in—and provided the spell lasts no longer than midnight of the day it's cast."

He held the slipper up to the light again. "There must have been a manufacturing defect. This thing should have self-destructed at the stroke of twelve." Handing back the slipper, he said, "Got to go

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before the cement sets, Sondy. Sounds to me there's a fairy godmother in the woodpile somewhere."

After midnight, when the pressure's off, fairy godmothers picnic until dawn in a bower hung with Chinese lanterns deep in the Crabtree Forest. Sonderborg found Natalie, the one he was looking for, sitting at a picnic table apart from the others in front of a heap of potato salad, cold cuts, and pickles. An immense, broad-beamed woman with fist-sized dimples in her elbows and knuckles like elephant knees, she wore the conical hat and bo-peep skirt which has somehow become the uniform of her profession. "Good to see you again, Fairy Godmother," he smiled.

"Fairy Godmother? The name's a knife in my heart, Sondy," moaned Natalie. "Better call me the Curse of the Sonderborgs. What have I done for you lately? What good's a fairy godmother who can't make a house call now and then?"

"Now, now, Fairy Godmother," soothed Sonderborg, sitting down opposite her. Natalie's crying jags were a family legend.

"I'm a bum, a lazy bum," insisted Natalie, and punished herself by taking a huge bite from a garlic sausage. Then she brightened. "Beer all round, Masterson!" she ordered. A long-legged man wearing smoked glasses, a leather suit, and a leather cape with a scalloped hem was hanging by his knees from an overhead tree limb. He squeaked to acknowledge her order and flew off on a staggered course through the trees in the direction of the beer keg.

"Blind as a post and doesn't hit a tree," marveled Natalie. Then she added, "Well, Sondy, what brings you here? Natalie hopes she can help, but since the Tooth Fairy Purges we've all had to lie kind of low."

The count told his story. When he was done, he produced the glass slipper and asked, "Do any of your colleagues go in for stuff like this?"

Natalie sniffed. "Only one. She was never much for style. The see-through look went out a long time ago. Anyway, we don't see her around here much nowadays." Sonderborg waited for a name. But Natalie looked away. "Sondy, let me tell you a story with a moral," she said at last. "Masterson and me hadn't been married a week when we had this little lovers' spat and" —she nodded at her crystal wand stuck in the horseradish jar— "I changed him into a bat. Oh, it was just a love tap and he changed right back. But that's when we knew the honeymoon was over.

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"Other quarrels followed as summer follows spring, and I—well, I did it a couple more times. That's a hell of a whack to the old metabolism, believe you me. And gradually Masterson started favoring the bat side, until finally he got to be as you see him now. So here's the moral to my little story, Sondy: don't mess with fairy godmothers." She nodded at the glass slipper. "Particularly, don't mess with that one."

"But Crown Prince Hugo—"

"May his father live forever," prayed Natalie.

"Wants to marry the girl," insisted Sonderborg.

Natalie popped the heel of the garlic sausage into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully for a few seconds. "Come to think of it, the fairy godmother in question might just find a godchild married into the royal family a real handy thing to have," she concluded. Sonderborg's fairy godmother wagged him closer with a ponderous finger. The count leaned forward like someone laying his neck on the axe-man's block. "Donnabella," said Natalie. The "d" and "b" were garlic knockout punches. Sonderborg sagged and grabbed the bench with the back of his knees.

Donnabella, a blue-haired woman in a smart business suit, with glasses on a rhinestone chain, answered the door of her apartment on exclusive Rose Garland Street herself. She listened coldly while Sonderborg explained why he'd come. But before he'd finished, she shouted over her shoulder, "Lovey, is that you I hear in the icebox?"

"Who?" came a muffled voice from inside the apartment.

"I said no snacks between meals!" called Donnabella in a voice that snapped like a whip. She listened for a moment. Then, satisfied, she turned back to Sonderborg. "Messenger boy," she said through clenched teeth, "tell the royal nitwit to stop pestering my goddaughter. Tell him to waltz right on by if he runs into her at another ball. Tell him I've got bigger and better plans for her."

"Maybe we should let the young lady decide that for herself," answered Sonderborg sharply. He regretted his tone at once, for Donnabella's eyes flashed fire and her wand appeared from behind her back, making runic notations on the air as it came. The light tap sent a cold, electric thrill through Sonderborg's body. Suddenly his shoulders slumped violently down into a terrible stoop while his knees rocketed up past his ears. Donnabella and the doorway were looming high above him now. But there was something else. Deep inside him, from the very depths of his soul, a small hard bubble

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was making its way upward toward the light and growing as it came. Though Sonderborg struggled with all his might to repress it, the bubble crowded up into his mouth, bulging out his cheeks and the skin below his chin. He fought to hold it back, refusing to make the admission the bubble demanded. Suddenly he couldn't hold out any longer. *"Rivet!"* he boomed.

Donnabella pushed him out into the hall with a fastidious toe. "Let's don't let our paths cross again," she warned and closed the door.

Flatfooted and blinking, Sonderborg sat on the hall runner for a moment. Then the cold electricity returned. His shoulders straightened, his ears zoomed up above his knees, and in a twinkling he was himself again. More or less.

No man who has not experienced one can appreciate the full horror of a frog-change. As he sat there watching Rinaldo thumb through the filing-cabinet drawer, Sonderborg moaned inwardly over his vanishing hair and twisted his long mottled fingers in despair. Rinaldo yawned widely. The sump-hole raids had been a long-drawn-out business and weren't over yet. "I'll tell you what the law says, Sondy," he said. "It says use the Sow's Ear Rule of Thumb. That means a guy can't use magic to change a less into a greater. He can't change a sow's ear into a silk purse. However, it *is* legal—though clearly bad business—for the guy to change a silk purse into a sow's ear. So if you want to be technical, there's no law against the guy changing someone like yourself into a frog, if you follow my drift. However, it's definitely a felony to do it without your consent."

"I should think so," said Sonderborg, his indignation bordering on tears.

As Rinaldo pulled a file from the drawer, he added, "Of course, you'll need witnesses to swear you didn't ask Donnabella to do it to you."

"But who'd ask somebody to change them into a frog?" protested Sonderborg loudly.

Rinaldo shrugged a swan's wing and slumped down into his chair. "It's a kinky world out there," he said. Then he began humming through the file as though it was the score of a dull musical. At last he said, "You were wondering how a fairy godmother can afford Rose Garland Street, times being what they are. It says here that Donnabella's gone legit. She's started a place called Pedigreed-Pet Plaza, where the wealthy can board their dogs and canaries when

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they go on trips. It looks here like she's doing quite well for herself in the world of business. A while back she became the first of her kind to be named to the board of a major corporation, Merlin Armor. At the time the bleeding-heart liberals called it tokenism. But she's been named to others since. Seems to me she was just put on the board of what-do-you-call-it, the company that makes those divining-rod devices the fair-labor-practice people use for detecting the presence of elves on a job site."

"Brownie-Point Industries," said Sonderborg.

"You've got it," said Rinaldo, closing the file and looking up at the clock with very tired eyes. "Well, you keep me informed, Sondy. If she's up to something, we'll burn her good."

Sonderborg left the office, leaving Rinaldo to catch forty winks with his head tucked under his wing.

When he got back home, Sonderborg tried for a little shuteye himself, but his sleep was haunted by stork-filled dreams. By mid-afternoon he had taken up a position in a doorway across the street from the Pedigreed-Pet Plaza. Donnabella's plans seemed to involve sending her godchild to one of the many balls held each night, this being the height of the social season. As fairy godmother, she would have to be there at her godchild's place at the start of the evening to cast the spell. Ergo, reasoned Sonderborg, sooner or later Donnabella would have to lead him to the mystery girl.

Pedigreed-Pet Plaza was an old townhouse dressed up with a marble facade, canopy, and braided doorman. As the afternoon progressed, a few young matrons in fine carriages arrived, presumably to visit pets. Then a carriage pulled up containing Trade Smith, a bearded gentleman whose name and face were familiar to everyone, appearing as it did along with that of his brother Mark on a box of popular throat lozenges. More recently, Trade Smith had made the rotogravures by marrying the leggy young manicurist now seated beside him in the carriage. The couple entered Pedigreed-Pet Plaza.

A half an hour later, the woman came out alone. As the doorman helped her back into the carriage, a loud squawking broke out overhead. A large forest-green parrot was sidling back and forth on a second-story windowsill, shouting something the count couldn't quite catch. Then a hand—was it Donnabella's?—clamped around the feathered neck and pulled the bird back inside. The honeymoon's over, thought Sonderborg. Then he frowned. What on earth made him think of that?

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At five o'clock, Donnabella left for the day, carrying a wire cage in one hand and a leather pool-cue case under her arm. Sonderborg followed at a safe distance all the way to the Central Market. He was puzzled by her purchases at the white-mouse stall, perplexed when she added to the cage the finest Norway grey in the rat peddler's pushcart, and utterly bewildered when she sought out the lizard man, who wore his wares tied up in neat bunches by their green tails around the brim of his sombrero.

It wasn't until she stopped at a Mr. Pumpkin franchise on her way home that things began to fall into place. He remembered the abandoned pumpkin by the roadside, the grey-whiskered coachman (a Skandahoovian? yes—but more specifically, a Norwegian), the green-liveried footmen, the team of white horses. The count's heart beat faster. The mystery girl was about to ride again!

Pleased with himself, Sonderborg rounded the corner with careless haste. But Donnabella lay in wait for him, wearing a cruel smile. She had set down her purchases. The pool-cue case was unzipped and empty. "Messenger boy," she said, as she finished screwing the two halves of her wand together, "you don't listen good."

Sonderborg tried to break and run, but the wand tap came. In a twinkling, he'd gone frog again and was hopping left and right to avoid being punted out into traffic. At last he managed to duck through a sewer grating in the curb and trembled at the bars until she crossed the street.

The Lion's Tooth was a small bar across the street from Donnabella's apartment. When he'd gulped down his second double brandy, Sonderborg ordered a third. Then to distract himself from his own miserable state—his neck and ears were rapidly going the way of his hair—he set himself to figuring out what Donnabella was up to. The usual fairy-godmother routine was to marry the kid up a notch or two. It looked like Donnabella was doing a hell of a lot better than that. But what was in it for her? A little business thrown Pedigreed-Pet Plaza's way? Hardly. Or did Donnabella present a bill when the honeymoon was over?

Sonderborg straightened up with a start. Suddenly the whole damn thing fell into place, piece by diabolical piece. His smile was still smug and wide when he noticed the fat glossy blue fly buzzing against the window about ten feet away. Sonderborg hadn't eaten yet that day and it popped into his mind that that fly would probably have a refreshing peppermint taste. The thought sent cold tears of

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saliva falling from the roof of his mouth down onto his tongue, which stirred like an awakening serpent. Suddenly the tongue darted forward, crowding in coil after coil against the back of his teeth. Sonderborg frowned uneasily. Then his eyes sprang open wide and he grabbed the edge of the bar with both hands. "Oh, no!" he prayed through clenched teeth. "Oh, please, no!"

"Have you eaten, Sondy?" asked Natalie, interrupting the count's story. They were back at the picnic table in the lanterned bower. His dismal nod made her put down her sandwich, wipe a palm on her knee, and take his chin in her hand. "Sondy, how come you look so lousy?" At that moment Masterson returned with their beers.

Sonderborg took a long, long pull on his. "I'm okay," he insisted, and continued with what he'd been saying.

"So Donnabella offers some girl in a rotten family situation—you know, wicked stepmother, ugly stepsisters—the chance to leave home, marry a titan of industry, and live on Easy Street. Soon the blushing bride lures the hubby to Pedigreed-Pet Plaza, where he gets a demonstration of what it means to have Donnabella as an in-law. Take it from one who knows, a little taste of being a doggy or a pussycat goes a long way. Pretty soon he's signing anything that's put in front of him—powers of attorney, voting proxies, anything." Sonderborg stopped and spread his hands helplessly.

"That's what they're up to. The trouble is, I can't prove it. Puppies and pussycats tell no tales. The trouble is—" Here the count's voice broke and he turned away. "Fairy godmother," he said, "you see what she's done to me. Can't you help? Can't you change me back to the way I was?"

Natalie shook her head. "The only law the fairy-godmother jungle knows is Don't be a buttinski. Besides, I can't buck Donnabella. She carries a big wand, a Magnum Super Six." She looked at him for a long time as though her heart was going to break. Then she added quietly, "Of course, if you could maybe steal her wand for me—"

Sonderborg's was a proud line. One of his ancestors had bearded the deadly Cockatrice in its nest. Another had followed Good Prince Tristan into sledded exile beyond the Winter Glacier. The count smote mottled palm with mottled fist. By damn, he'd do it!

Later that evening, back in The Lion's Tooth bar, Sonderborg, grim-faced, determined, and balding, waited for Donnabella to leave her apartment. Yes, he'd track her to the mystery girl. Then, as the

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fairy godmother swaggered about with the terrible wand under her arm, he would sneak up behind her, grab the damn thing, and run like hell, that's what he'd do!

And perhaps he would have. But a wind sprang up off the harbor and the tossing trees filled Rose Garland Street with stork shadows. In the midst of this, Donnabella finally appeared, carrying her wand and the afternoon's purchases. But by then Sonderborg's courage had drained completely away. Rooted to his spot at the bar, he watched Donnabella and Cunegunda and Fen House and his manhood disappear around the corner. He caught the barkeep's eye and ordered another round.

For several long hours, he brooded over his glass. Then he called for pen and paper and went to a table. First he wrote a lengthy farewell to Cunegunda, explaining he had decided to become a hermit and live far from the eyes of man in some ruined chapel by the marge of a pool. Next he wrote a letter to Rinaldo, outlining his suspicions about the Pedigreed-Pet Plaza, hoping perhaps to harm Donnabella for having brought him so low.

It was almost a quarter to twelve when Sonderborg dispatched his letters at the postal-carrier-pigeon cote on the corner. As he started to go, a fat, tweedy man with a red-and-white-checkered napkin under his chin emerged from Donnabella's apartment building and hurried off down the street. It was the man from the night before, the one in the tree above the abandoned pumpkin. Could he also be Donnabella's Lovey out for a forbidden midnight snack? Had Sonderborg found another, a safer way to the mystery girl?

In spite of Lovey's habit of swiveling his head completely around and looking backward as he walked, the count managed to follow him to Embassy Row. There, in a splendid courtyard under the Sandalian banner (twelve fluttering fishes argent on a field azur), stood an orange carriage. At the fat man's approach, the white horses set the cobblestones to sparking under their nervous hooves and the coachmen, swallowing a hefty Norwegian oath, cringed back in his box. Suddenly the lounging footmen were all jittery arms and legs. Smacking his lips over their plump green calves, Lovey bounded lightly up to the roof of the carriage.

Almost at once, a pretty, overpainted girl with hair piled high and a sparkling ballgown hurried from the embassy. She was followed by the babyfaced heir to the Silver Bullet Munitions fortune, whose product had been instrumental in driving the werewolf clan back into the darkest depths of the Crabtree Forest. The lovesick playboy

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helped the mystery girl up into the orange carriage, imploring her to come with him the very next night to the Rapunzel Ropeladder-Works Ball. Her coy giggle was the coachman's signal to crack his whip and send the carriage clattering out into the street.

Sonderborg ran after it, hoping to find a fourwheeler for hire along the way. But the street was empty. As the carriage turned a far corner, the Cathedral bell tolled the first stroke of midnight. The count shook his head, knowing he could never catch up now by running. Then an intriguing thought came to him. How much more sensible to put his feet together and hop. His first try resulted in a gratifying, effortless forty-foot jump. The next hop was even better, and the one after that brought him to the corner. But two more hops and he was standing lost and crestfallen at a six-way intersection. As he wondered which way to go, the last pitiless stroke of midnight sounded and died away.

All at once he heard the frantic scurrying of many little feet. Then three white mice, two lizards, and a fat grey rat burst from one of the streets and scattered every which way. Close on their heels came Lovey, running low to the ground, cheeks bloated purple, jaw chewing with quick greed. Sonderborg raced back the way they had come. There, beyond the hollowed-out pumpkin in the gutter, his quarry, the mystery girl, barefoot now and in rags, was quietly unlocking the door of a shabby house.

After firing off a quick pigeon to Crown Prince Hugo, Sonderborg waited for him across the street in a twenty-four-hour donut shop called Night Crullers. As he drank his coffee, he let the counterman tell him about the mystery girl and how step-people, both wicked and ugly, were indeed involved.

The prince arrived in short order, hair freshly oiled, chrysanthemum bouquet in the crook of his arm, the very image of Fratollini's portrait of Bastian the Suave. When the situation had been explained to him he said, "You may withdraw, Count Sonderborg, Master of Fen House. Your beloved prince will take it from here." The Crown Prince then crossed to the house, knocked loudly, and struck a pose, as if the front door were a full-length mirror. When one real sleepy mystery girl appeared with a candle at an upstairs window and hoisted a slop bucket up onto the sill, the Master of Fen House thought it best to get the hell out of there.

Just as Sonderborg reached home, Rinaldo pulled up in a police wagon to tell him the Magic Squad had raided Pedigreed-Pet Plaza

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and found all the proof it needed. Motioning the count to get in, Rinaldo said, "Donnabella made one big mistake when she changed Trade Smith into a parrot. That bird blew the whistle on her whole operation. And parrot or not, his testimony will stand up in court."

The police wagon arrived at Rose Garland Street just as a sergeant and ten constables charged into Donnabella's apartment building and pounded loudly up the stairs. Then there was an ominous silence, which ended in the terrific racket of a wild downward stampede. Now a flock of terrified, shoving sheep was jammed up at the front door. Now they had burst out into the street, where they huddled together in a trembling flock. Then they slowly turned back into policemen with long sad faces and curly white hair. "Baad luck, Inspector," said the sergeant. "She bleat—she beat us to the draw."

"I told you to wait until I got back with the wandproof vests," said Rinaldo, selecting a glen-plaid one from the police wagon and buttoning it on.

"Do these things really work?" asked Sonderborg skeptically.

"Like a charm," Rinaldo assured him. "Remember that old dragchain you used to have to wear in case you got struck by lightning? The Merlin Armor people have eliminated that altogether."

"Then do me a favor," begged Sonderborg. "Let me lead the next charge. I've got a score to settle."

A mural of that famous charge now decorates the police-headquarters cafeteria. Splendid, truncheons at the ready, a fresh batch of bright-vested constables are dashing up the staircase, led by a larger-than-life Sonderborg with full head of hair, arm in an "upward and onward" gesture. A moment later in time and the artist would have had an entirely different mural. For as the count's foot touched the last step, he remembered that Donnabella was on the board of the same Merlin Armor that made his vest! Suppose her grand design was to infiltrate and sabotage the kingdom's antimagic defenses—Merlin Armor, Brownie-Point Industries, Silver Bullet Munitions, and all the rest—so she could end up ruling everything with an iron wand? Sonderborg tried to slam on the brakes, but the charging constables behind him swept him through the open door of the fairy godmother's apartment.

When Donnabella stepped out from behind the door, flexing her wand between her fists, all way of retreat was blocked. "Hey, look, Lovey," she said with a wicked smile, "Messenger Boy's come to visit again."

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"Who?" grinned Lovey, smiling down hungrily from his crystal perch on the chandelier.

Then Donnabella waded in, hacking and slashing, changing the startled police into snack-sized creatures that Lovey pounced down upon and swallowed whole, spitting out little badges and tiny pairs of handcuffs. In all the confusion, amid the shouts of owlish glee and the squeals of snack terror, Sonderborg managed to duck under Donnabella's mighty backhand and make it out into the hall.

But the evil fairy godmother caught up with him at the top of the stairs and changed him once again into a frog. But before she could stomp him into the floor, a lucky bolt from a police sharpshooter's crossbow knocked the wand out of her hand. Twisting and turning, the crystal thing tumbled through the air and crashed into a thousand pieces at the bottom of the stairwell. Rinaldo and the cheering sheep-police charged up the steps to subdue Donnabella and her bloodthirsty consort.

For Sonderborg it seemed an eternity before his soul gave a halfhearted heave and he became himself again.

It was a beautiful day, set under a storkless sky. The carriage, one of those old-fashioned domed vehicles completely encircled by a running board, smelled of macassar oil. Sonderborg watched the reedy countryside roll by, wondering why Natalie had chosen to go on ahead. Masterson's explanation—he was hanging by his knees from the luggage rack—had been detailed and animated but pitched too high for the human ear.

In any event, Sonderborg was happy to escape the city which had become a madhouse. The king had suspended the Omnibus Magic Act to allow the Royal Wizard, a correspondence-school graduate with a mail-order wand, to locate and restore to their human shapes the Pedigreed-Pet Plaza captives who had fled in panic in the course of the police raid. During the night, the wizard had run amok, turning every stray creature that crossed his path into a human being. The next morning, all across the city the burgers awoke to find total strangers curled up on the rug before the fire or eating cheese in the pantry. The ensuing uproar brought the king low with a heart attack. Crown Prince Hugo was said to be playing with the Scepter and Orb again.

The carriage passed through a country gate and down a winding road, between marsh grass and rushes topped with red-winged blackbirds, and then stopped before the half submerged stones of Fen

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House. Natalie waved from under a tree, where she was eating from a hamper. Sonderborg stepped from the carriage and started toward her. But he stopped dead in his tracks. There on a broad lily pad in the Fen House moat was the most beautiful frog he had ever seen.

*"Rivet!"* said the frog in a charming contralto.

"Cunegunda!" cried Sonderborg. "Cunegunda, is that really you?"

"You mean Masterson didn't explain, Sondy?" asked Natalie, swallowing a hard-boiled egg. "Well, to make a long story short, without Donnabella's wand I can't change you back. But I can change you forward, if you follow my meaning. I mean you don't really have too far to go in that direction, anyway. And your wonderful Cunegunda here thought it might be easier for you to make your mind up if she was waiting for you on the other side, so to speak."

How Sonderborg's heart went out to the plump little frog! He took a deep breath. "Then let's not keep her waiting," he said firmly. Masterson flew down with the traditional blindfold and cigarette. Sonderborg refused them both with a rather theatrical gesture.

"Nor do I want your pity," he declared. "Far better to be a simple sow's ear in some rustic setting with one's loving mate at one's side than to be a frivolous silk purse eating alone from plates of gold in a city that has become a sham and a shambles."

Taking one last look around him, he squeezed his eyes shut and bowed his head. Natalie's wand hit him a solid blow. Count Sonderborg flickered and became a haze. The haze condensed down and down until it formed a big round frog. With a hop and a plop and another hop, he was up on the lily pad and looking deep into Cunegunda's wonderful chestnut eyes.

*"Rivet!"* they sang together, contralto and baritone joyfully combined.

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**a *NEW* short story by**

**LELAND NEVILLE**

*Leland Neville has had short stories published in various magazines since his first, "The Morgue," in the November 1983 EQMM. As for this one, think Ray Bradbury, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley . . .*

# WRITERS ANONYMOUS

***by LELAND NEVILLE***

I recently failed my third—and last—attempt to become a licensed writer. The competition for one of these coveted licenses is intense and the judging strict but fair. There are only a few openings a year—contrary to what you may believe, most of our writers live long lives—and since a bestseller is lucky to be read by two thousand people, the State's position, no matter how great its desire to support the arts, is difficult. There is, after all, only so much money.

The woman (I think I know who she is) who reported me took the right action; it's usually easier to just look the other way. The time I stole from the company to write is money stolen from the State and therefore money stolen from the sick. And if I have the energy to write after my work assignment, in my apartment—well, I now understand that that energy could be put to more productive uses. Valueless creativity steals from everyone, including ourselves.

We are fortunate that writing without a license is usually considered not a crime but a disease. I have today heard about the crueler, less informed times, and what can I say except I'm glad to be alive here and today. I will never write again. It has been a bad habit. I will henceforth produce only goods of value. I understand I can never be a licensed writer. No exceptions. No one will ever read my words. I accept this. I am grateful for this program and I

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have the number to call should the muse be more persistent than I believe. My final ten minutes of writing is now almost over. I am just filling the remaining time with words, anxious to close this sorry chapter of my life. I am tired of writing. Bored. I have nothing to say. Just a few more seconds. They won't let us stop. Part of the therapy. Only a few more seconds.

There is a burning flush in my legs that began with the soles of my feet. Hot. Hotter. Hottest. They force the pencil back into my hand. "Write," they command. "Write. It doesn't matter what you write as long as you write—write about the pain, write our words. We don't care what you write. Just write." I drop the pencil and the pain, the burning, shoots through me. I write these words and it decreases. I understand.

"We're fully licensed. We know what we're doing. You won't die or suffer any permanent physical injury. And the good part is you will never write again. This aversion therapy is very successful when employed by licensed people. We, by the way, have second-class licenses. You will soon always associate writing with pain. For most of us that's natural, but there are a few who need our help."

It was just an idea for a story. I wasn't necessarily going to write the story, I just didn't want to forget the idea. The pain increases. Burning.

"You have put yourself through too much in order to obtain a third-class writer's license. With one of those, you're only an anonymous word assembler. You never get a byline. You could never reach the two-thousand-readership mark that would earn you a permanent first-class license, you must know that. A third-rank wasn't much of an ambition. You'll thank us someday." The burning increases. "Write." The burning increases. "Don't repeat yourself. Anything but that. Write. That's better."

The idea. It hasn't diminished. *Isolated, unaware of each other's existence, sharing a common, no, an uncommon thought, the unlicensed begin to communicate and create. The authorities (maybe an eavesdropper reports them to the State) become aware of the unlicensed ones and of course are threatened. The State has lost its monopoly on words. What powers have these people obtained? How did they get them? Who gave them to them? And of course the big question: what do they plan to do with their power?*

"Next time you feel the urge to write," one of the licensed aversionists tells me, "call the number Writers Anonymous gave you."

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"I don't think," the other aversionist says, "he'll need the number or us again. This should do it. And one step closer to being first-rank."

Except for my ankle monitor, I am naked and my clothes are in shreds. "Write," the bigger one commands. Except for their statures they are nearly identical. "Keep writing. Don't stop. Experts will look over your words. They'll find the real meaning. You can't expect to fool the top-rankers. We know you wrote something, we just can't find it."

"Maybe he ate it," the smaller one says. The bigger one ignores him.

"Just write what you wrote about twenty minutes ago. At two-twelve. That's when the ankle monitor detected writing."

"The seal on his ankle monitor has not been tampered with," says the smaller.

"Of course not!" yells the bigger. "That's how we picked up the writing. And in the ten minutes it took us to get here, no one saw him leave his cubicle. He doesn't have access to a videowriter, we haven't found any paper or even pencils—"

"And now he's just copying our words," says the smaller. "Unless he was pretending to write. Can the monitor tell the difference between really writing and pretending to write?"

"Why would anyone do that? Do you think he's having fun? And it could lead to more shocks."

"Look!" The smaller one grabs my left arm while my right keeps writing. "He's scratched something into his flesh. A couple of words.'

"We're going to have to make him stop writing. I think this is considered an unusual circumstance that forces us to break orders.'

I have resumed writing. I am still naked. The smaller one is searching for a camera so my forearm can be documented on film. I have promised that when a camera is found I will stop writing and be absolutely still so a clear photo of my arm can be taken. The bigger one would like me, of course, to expand on the two words scratched—with just a fingernail—into my arm. POWER COMM. It was just an idea for that story. "It is not," I say, "power to the Communists." The only ideas they are familiar with are recycled ones. Neither, I am certain, believes that writing can give birth to ideas. "You don't have to start with an idea," I say.

"Then keep writing," the bigger one says. "And don't talk."

*It's the power of the unlicensed, unconcerned about obtaining c*

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*license they know they can never possess. Free. The strong imprison the wise, but their time and energy is futilely spent attempting to steal the meaning of their captive's creativity, believing that labeling equals knowledge. Waiting for words that will free the minds.*

The little one, with his indifference—affected or real—has gotten more out of me than I want to tell. He is reading these words. "Write my name," he says, "so the top-rankers who will read this will know. So far only third-rankers are studying your ravings—but they talk, and second- and first-rankers listen. And there are an awful lot of them. Time is up. Did you get my name written?"

*The unlicensed, now an almost invisible network, either overestimate the power of their knowledge or underestimate evil. Either way, their mistake could be fatal unless immediate steps are taken . . .*

Since writing the above, what once was considered a sin of the flesh but today is called merit reinforcement occurred. She has a second-class license in Nineteenth Century Far East mythical sensuality and says there is plenty of opportunity for advancement. She also says she knows that for writers there are only ten positions, but that number may be reduced because the bestseller standard of two thousand readers is today rarely met. She is one of the almost two thousand readers who made *There Is More to Happiness Than Being Happy* a bestseller. She is a Renaissance woman.

Both stop just outside my cell door. "Watch what you say," the man says. "See, he's already writing my words. He writes everything."

She enters my cell first. "Sure. That's why we fourth-class examiners were chosen for this assignment. No one cares what we say. Our words can be safely ignored."

The man follows her inside. "If he had only tried to be sensible, not fixated and obsessed. He hasn't really struggled against it. If he hadn't been greedy during the merit-reinforcement therapy, he could have kept a good thing going. But he even blew that. And look at him writing. Why?"

They sit at the foot of the bare cot I'm on and continue to ignore me. It is, of course, part of the isolation therapy. "He is," the woman says, "criminally insane. There's no logical answer to why he writes. He just can't help himself. That's why the prescribed treatment is so subjective. He's not receiving any monetary benefits from his

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writing, yet he writes like a dedicated first-ranker. Well, maybe this experimental writing therapy will be successful."

"It should be—it was mandated from the top."

"It was mandated from a third-class examiner. That's all we have to know. And all we have to know about the treatment is that, hopefully, once the story that keeps working its way into his mimicking and mocking words is completed he will be cured. We just make sure he doesn't escape and has enough paper and pencils—and, when he finishes the story, prevent him from beginning another. At that point in his treatment, we have permission to use force."

She gets up to leave, but he sticks his face over my words. "How are we going to know when he finishes?" he asks her. "Is he going to write 'The End'? I've read some stories and if there isn't a 'The End,' it's hard to tell."

She stops at the cell door, keeping her back to us. "We send his scribblings to the experts. They'll see the end coming. They'll let us know and we'll be ready."

He starts uncertainly toward the door. "I think we should just stop him from writing. We can do it in this contained environment. We've performed more difficult tasks—not that it's ever gotten us a higher grade. Every time he writes a page, we should burn it in front of his eyes. That would do it. But even if it didn't, there are lots of other ways. The top-rankers' theory about curing him by letting him purge his own story doesn't make a lot of sense unless—unless they think there's something worthwhile in his story. Maybe that's it."

The woman abruptly turns and they almost collide. "You talk too much and he writes too much. Maybe you're both psychotic and can't help yourselves." She stops and considers me. "Watch this. He's been writing continuously and the paper is almost filled. He needs to stop, wants to stop, but—" She unfolds a clean sheet of paper from her jacket pocket. "Here you go. Nice new paper." She tosses it on my cot. "And a nice new pencil." It follows the paper onto the cot. I grab them both. "See? He can't help himself."

Actually, this new paper does help. It always does.

*A clean start, like the clean start the State needs if it is serious about intercepting the secrets of the unlicensed and ultimately controlling the power. The unlicensed are a small minority and can never hope to continue to manipulate the majority as they are now quietly doing. There is effective action the State can take, but patience is the*

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*critical ingredient. Because the State lacks this vital quality, I can reveal the plan of action which would almost immediately debilitate this subversive network. It is so incredibly simple . . .*

"He's writing the story," says the man, "not just copying our words and actions."

"You shouldn't have talked. Now he's back to mimicking us."

"I'd like nothing better than to rip that pencil from his fingers and use it as kindling for the fire that would burn his words. He's got just about every grade-two info manager reading his scribblings, looking for clues. What a waste of time and money. He probably doesn't have any idea how many grade-two info managers there are."

I do. Over two thousand. And that isn't enough to stop the unlicensed communication.

## "Q"

## DETECTIVERSE

### *STEALING AWAY*

*by E. E. MURPHY*

A private eye named Franklin Shand
Was skillful and in great demand.
He trapped them all—expertly planned—
Save for a jewel thief dubbed "The Hand."
Shand tracked him to a mountain high,
But his vigilance went awry.
In dark of night, the thief slid by
As though he'd vanished in the sky.
And from this case I here imply
The Hand is quicker than The Eye.

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**a *NEW* short story by**

**CARL WOOTON**

*Harmony held the phone for a moment and tried to understand why Eric might have chosen The Fashion Spot as a place to meet. Weekend tourists looking for a singles scene in New Orleans thought it was a place to go, partly because it was in the area known as Fat City. Harmony knew it really was a meat locker, one of those bars filled with plastic-chic decor and where every woman who walked in was on display and thought of as probably for rent. She hated it, Eric knew it, and she was there. He was not.*

*Our first story by Carl Wooton, whose short fiction has appeared in a number of small literary magazines—two recently in the Hudson Review . . .*

# HARMONY'S SONG

## *by CARL WOOTON*

Harmony Romero felt the stares even before she walked through the door of The Fashion Spot. Four men at the bar all turned to watch her as she came in, and her skin tingled like something was crawling on it. She really didn't want to be there, but Eric had insisted. "I need you," he'd said.

"You always need me."

"And you're always there. That's what's so great about you."

And she thought it was true. It had been true for nearly a year. He said he needed her, and she was always there. She said she needed him, and he was hard to find, usually a recorded voice on an answering machine with a message that made him sound like the world's greatest gift to women. But he always called back.

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This time he said he needed to see her because he was leaving town for a few days—and the rush of sensations at the thought of his being gone made her not register what he was saying about meeting him at The Fashion Spot until it was too late. She searched for the name of some other place to meet, but he was already saying, "See you at six, Harmony. Ta ta!" He sang the last two syllables.

He hung up, and she'd held the phone for a moment and tried not to understand why he might have chosen The Fashion Spot as a place to meet. Weekend tourists looking for a singles scene in New Orleans thought it was a place to go, partly because it was in the area known as Fat City. Harmony knew it really was a meat locker, one of those bars filled with plastic-chic decor and where every woman who walked in was on display and thought of as probably for rent. She hated it, Eric knew it, and she was there. He was not.

She looked along the bar and the row of tables against the wall. There were only the four men at the bar and most of the tables were taken by couples. Five women sat around one table, however, looking, Harmony thought, as if they were trying to figure out how to divide the four men at the bar among themselves. Two of the women glared at her. She was bewildered by the hostility in their faces and felt an impulse to stop and tell them not to worry about her, she was meeting someone—he would be here any minute, they didn't need to worry.

At the bar, one of the men stood and made a gesture as though to offer her a stool. He was nice-looking, taller than Eric, and maybe younger, but it was hard to tell in the dim light. He smiled at her. She looked at him and felt the others watching her, then she walked past him to a table in a rear corner and sat facing the door with her back to the wall. The man who had offered her the stool and the others at the bar were laughing. The five women at the round table looked at her, then turned away. One of them muttered something that started them all giggling. Harmony tried to ignore them, but the high tilted mirror that ran the length of the wall behind the bar reflected everything in the room.

She was startled by the image of herself in it, her hair down, falling almost to her shoulderblades, and her face with the dark glasses still on. She took off the glasses and put them in her purse. A waitress appeared at the table and Harmony told her she was waiting for someone, she would order when he arrived.

The men at the bar laughed again. One of them slapped the bar several times with his hand, and even the bartender moved closer

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to see if they would let him in on the fun. Harmony heard one of the men ask him, "Is she a new one?"

The bartender shook his head and squinted through the dim light toward her. Harmony had only been there a few times, with Eric, and she didn't remember the bartender. She couldn't tell how well he was able to see her. He shook his head again and leaned forward to whisper something to the other men.

They laughed, and the one who had stood to greet her turned and looked at her. He got off his stool and leaned back to say something to the others. *Where was Eric?* He was definitely younger and taller than Eric, and he walked toward her in a way that made her think he was easily impressed with himself. She stood and looked around, then followed the sign to the ladies' room, hearing the word "fox" and louder laughter at the bar as she pushed through the restroom door.

She touched up her lipstick, combed her hair, and straightened her blouse. Eric's voice had had a special pleading in it that she had learned to recognize, and she had dressed for him. She wiped off her lipstick, then put more on, feeling like an idiot for letting him put her in a situation that made her run to the ladies' room to hide. She looked at herself in the mirror and thought about the last time she had told Eric she didn't want to see him any more. He had called the next night with that pleading tone in his voice and asked her to meet him at the Cafe du Monde at ten. She had waited at one of the small marbletop tables until almost eleven, until she'd been asked to order something or leave. She could still remember the embarrassment that had flooded through her and swearing she would never wait for him again. She also still remembered how especially tender he had been later that night at his apartment.

Harmony looked at her watch. She didn't know how long she'd been hiding here but she made up her mind that if Eric was not in the bar when she went back, she would leave. She would keep her promise to herself and more. She would go home and go about her business and when he called she would tell him she didn't need to see *him* anywhere. She would mean it this time.

And she so much expected him to be there when she came back into the bar that she felt momentarily helpless and paralyzed when she looked around the room and couldn't find him.

The waitress asked her, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Is there another way out of here?"

"This way," the waitress said and pointed down the narrow hall

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that led to the restrooms. "Take a right at the end and you'll see the exit sign. It leads out to the parking lot in back."

Harmony hesitated and looked back to the bar.

The waitress said, "Maybe he'll come in a minute."

"What?"

"The one you're waiting on. Maybe he'll show up in a minute."

Harmony said, "He's not coming." Then: "Is there a pay phone?"

The waitress pointed again down the hall toward the back.

Harmony followed the hall and found the phone on the wall next to the rear exit. She rummaged in her purse to find a coin, dialed Eric's number, and waited. It rang three times, then there was a click and a whirring sound and the answering machine was playing Eric's greeting.

"This is Eric Andrepont. I can't come to the phone now, but at the tone, leave your name, age, measurements, and phone number, and I'll call you as soon as I have a clear spot on my calendar. Ta ta!"

Harmony had once told him the message offended her, and he had laughed and said it was only a joke. That was the same night he'd given her a key to his apartment to show her how much he trusted her. She had given him a key to her apartment several weeks before. She said, "Eric, I can't wait in this place. If you really want to see me, I'll be at home."

She hung up and went out the door to the parking lot. The air had turned grey and was full of fine mist. She didn't have an umbrella and had to walk through an alley to get to the street, so that by the time she got to her car she was wet, cold, and mad.

When she drove into the lot of her apartment complex, she looked around to see if his car was parked in the visitors' parking area. In her apartment, she immediately felt its emptiness. He was not there. She hadn't consciously expected him to be, but the sense of aloneness still caught her by surprise. She had to stop for a moment and take several deep breaths to smooth out the ragged edges of her nerves.

She took off her wet clothes and put on the jogging suit she usually wore when she expected to stay around the apartment. She fixed a light supper, watched television, tried to read three or four of the magazines on the coffee table, but gave that up when she realized she was looking at the pictures without registering anything about them. She called Eric's number three times during the evening, but all she heard was the beginning of the same recorded message. She hung up each time as soon as the tape began to play.

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She remembered the less than half full bottle of white wine left in the refrigerator a week before when Eric had come for supper. She poured herself a glass of it and took it with her into the bathroom, where she undressed. She was twenty-seven years old and not strikingly beautiful, but she kept herself in shape with aerobics and a reasonable diet. And she knew men were attracted by her dark hair and by a certain quality in her voice.

Two or three times in recent weeks, Eric had seemed on the verge of telling her something. The other morning especially, after he'd come to dinner and stayed the night, he had seemed about to say something, then realized he was going to be late for work.

Harmony finished the glass of wine before getting into the shower.

She hadn't finished drying herself when the phone rang.

Without giving her a chance to say hello, Eric said, "Sorry about this afternoon. I got tied up."

"You do that a lot."

"Don't get huffed about it."

"You know I hate that place."

"I said I'm sorry. Can I come over?"

"No."

"Why not?"

She looked at the digital clock on her dresser and saw it was nearly ten. "It's too late. I'm tired and I have to get up early tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's Sunday."

"I'm going to see my mother." Her mother lived in Lafayette, a three-hour drive from New Orleans. She made the trip every six or seven weeks. She hadn't planned to make the trip this weekend. "Besides," she said, "I thought you were going out of town."

Eric said, "Change in plans. I'm going next week instead. So if you want to see me this weekend, I better come over tonight."

"No, Eric. I'll come back early tomorrow. I'll call you then."

Eric hung up with his usual "Ta ta."

Harmony finished drying herself and dressed for bed. She turned off the lights, opened the draperies, and raised a window. It was April, but still cool—a TV weatherman had said it was the coolest spring in decades for southern Louisiana. She got into bed and looked out the window. The sky was clear and full of stars.

Eric knew all about the stars and had tried to help her find the Big and Little Dippers, Orion, and other constellations, but when

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she looked at the sky all she saw were stars. Eric had become impatient and told her he wouldn't try to teach her anything else.

A mockingbird in the trees behind the apartment house sang. Harmony recognized that sound because when she was much younger a mockingbird had made its spring nest in an oak tree outside her bedroom window at home. Her mother had told her that the night song was the male singing out of his need for the female. And she thought of Eric trying to tell her something that he couldn't get out.

She turned on the lamp beside the bed and dialed his number. It rang the three times, clicked, and the answering machine responded: "Hi, this is Eric. I just stepped out for a minute. I'll be right back, so leave a number, especially if your name is Harmony. Ta ta."

She said, "Eric, I'm sorry I was so cold. When you come back, don't go away again. I'm on my way over, as soon as I get dressed. Ta ta!" She sang the signoff the way he usually did.

She didn't need makeup, an old dress would be all right. Her hair was a mess but Eric wouldn't mind—he'd be happy just to see her. And if he wasn't home yet, she had her own key.

During the day, the trip from her apartment to his place could take thirty-five minutes or more, but at that time of night, without traffic and with a little luck with green lights, she made it in just a little over twenty.

His car was in its usual place in the parking lot, and she parked next to it. His apartment was dark. She rang his doorbell several times, but he didn't answer. Sounds of music and laughter and voices came from an apartment across the small courtyard that served as a common patio for the half dozen apartments built around it. Harmony found her key in her purse and was opening Eric's door when the music and voices suddenly grew louder and light splashed onto the courtyard from the opened door of the noisy apartment. A woman laughed and a man answered with laughter that she recognized.

Eric said, "Let's try my place."

The woman said, "We shouldn't."

"Of course we should. You liked it there last time. Not to mention the time before, and the time—"

"Hush—aren't you the one who's always talking about being discreet?"

Their laughter came closer, and Harmony looked for someplace

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to hide. Eric and the woman—a blonde—stepped from the shadows into the splash of light in the courtyard. There was noplace for Harmony to escape except into Eric's apartment. She jumped inside and shut the door behind her.

In the living room past the small foyer, she stopped. Had she locked the door? Would Eric notice if it was unlocked? She hurried to the study. It was actually a second bedroom, but Eric put a desk and his computer in it and called it a study. She left a small crack in the door, just enough to hear through, and knelt on the floor behind the desk.

The front door closed and the voices were in the apartment. Then there was a brief silence except for the sound of someone moving around. "Wine?" Eric said.

The woman must have nodded—there was the sound of the wine being poured and glasses clinked together.

Harmony felt a mixture of anger and humiliation rising up in her so strongly it seemed to her that Eric and the woman should have been able to sense it. He had told *her* he needed her. He had never said he loved her, but at those times recently when he was near to saying something, she believed he had come close. He had acted like he might love her, she told herself, he really had.

The woman said, "I want another glass."

Eric said, "Don't get sloshed on me. It's a lot more fun when you know what you're doing."

"*One* more."

Again Harmony heard someone moving around.

The woman said, "What are you doing?"

Eric said, "My message light is on."

"Let it go."

"I don't like to ignore messages. You never know when it might be important."

Harmony heard her own voice. Although most of the words weren't distinct, she heard herself singing "Ta ta!"

Eric said, "*Damn!*"

"What's the matter?"

"You have to go, my love."

"What do you mean?"

"What I said, love. Harmony's on her way over here. The girl I told you has been pestering me. You've got to be a good girl and disappear. Go back to the party, or go upstairs to your place. I'll get

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rid of her and come for you. It won't take long, but she's going to be here any minute—you've got to go."

The woman said, "I thought you were going to tell her to get out of your life."

"I am, love, I am. I'm looking for the right moment. She's a sweet kid and I don't want to hurt her any more than I have to."

"If you can't tell her, I can."

"I'll do it. Come on, you've got to go, love. I'll come for you after I've gotten rid of Harmony."

Harmony bit her lip and tasted blood. Her eyes filled and the very air in the room seemed to attack her flesh. She thought of what she had deluded herself he had been trying to say. She clenched her fists and leaned her forehead on the desk, fighting down the scream swelling up inside her. From the other room came the sound of a slap. The woman said, "Don't pat me there and tell me you're waiting for another woman."

"Don't be difficult, love."

"If I'm your *love,* meet her at the door and tell her you're with someone else."

"I can't do it that way. Harmony's too sweet."

"Don't push me!" the woman said.

"You've got to go!"

"No, I don't!"

There was the sound of another slap, only this time it was a sharper sound of flesh against flesh, hard. Someone fell.

The woman said, "You bastard!"

"Don't call me names, love. Just get the hell out of here."

"You're going to have to throw me out."

"Suit yourself."

Harmony listened to Eric and the woman fighting. The sounds got louder, then diminished, as if they had moved from the living room to the kitchen. Both were yelling. Objects fell, maybe a lamp or a couple of lamps, with the sound of glass breaking. Harmony stood and moved to the door, trying to see through the crack.

"You *bastard!*" the woman said again.

"Put that down."

There was the sound of the woman sucking in air and then pushing it out again. Something heavy fell. The woman shouted, "Oh, my God!"

Eric said, "Get help! Quick!" There was something wrong with his voice.

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Harmony opened the door and moved cautiously into the living room. Beyond, in the kitchen, she could see the blonde woman, who was very pretty, standing over Eric. On the floor, with a large kitchen knife stuck in his abdomen, he was trying to get up. The woman was wiping blood from her hands onto her blouse. All the buttons on her blouse were undone.

"Help me!" Eric said. His voice was weaker.

The blonde turned and ran from the apartment. Beyond the closed door Harmony heard her high heels rapping sharply along the paved walk, then on the stairs and along the balcony that allowed entrance to the second-floor apartments. A door slammed. Harmony went to the kitchen and leaned over Eric, who had fallen back on his side.

"Harmony!" he said, seeing her. "Thank God you're here! Call an ambulance, please!"

Harmony knelt beside him, but not within reach, careful to stay clear of the blood. His shirt and the top of his pants were soaked with it. It covered his hands and ran onto the floor. The look in his eyes was changing from intense pain and fear to a slowly growing cloudiness. As she watched his face turn grey, she thought of herself hiding in the study, listening to the soft laughter and the wine glasses clinking together. "Harmony," she heard him saying, "I'll get rid of her. I'll come for you." The woman had stood over him with the buttons of her blouse undone. Had that happened in the fight or had Eric unbuttoned her blouse on the sofa before he went to get the second glass of wine?

"Harmony," he whispered.

She said, "I'm here, Eric." She said it softly, almost tenderly, but she didn't touch him.

She watched him until he closed his eyes and fell asleep. His breathing came hard, with long spaces between breaths. Then she got to her feet. Stepping carefully around the blood, she found the answering machine and ran it back to where her message to him began. She erased it, looked back once at Eric, and left, closing the door behind her, thinking not to lock it.

In the parking lot, she looked up at the apartments on the second floor over Eric's. There were lights on in most of them, and she had no idea which one the blonde had run to. Was she trying to wash the blood off her hands and out of her blouse? The party across the courtyard was still going on.

The clock on her dresser read 1:46. She was surprised she had

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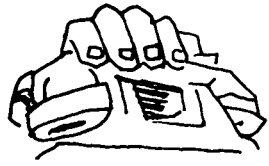
been gone so long. She changed again for bed, turned out the light, and looked out at the clear, dark sky full of stars.

She leaned over and dialed Eric's number, listened to his recorded message, waited for the tone, then said, "This is Harmony. I wanted to tell you goodnight, Eric, and to say I'm sorry I missed you tonight. Call me again if you ever need me. Ta ta, Eric." She said the "Ta ta" sadly.



## DETECTIVERSE

### *CASE CLOTHED*

*by WILLIAM C. THOMAS*

I'd like to travel back through time
And solve some great Victorian crime
In ancient, foggy London town
With bent-stemmed pipe and dressing gown
Or inverness and fore-and-aft
Or ulster coat to stop the draft
Or black-silk cape and opera hat
Or smoking jacket and cravat
Or macintosh for when it rains
Or cloak for stalking dockside lanes.
I'd like to travel back through time
And solve some great Victorian crime—
And yet, my word, do you suppose
I simply wish to wear the clothes?

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**a *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by**

**PETER TURNBULL**

*A nurse in a starched white smock stood in the corridor, which smelled of disinfectant. The tall windows allowed the interior of the hospital to flood with light and permitted an impressive view of the rooftops of Battlefield and Langside. Sussock saw an orange bus go down Battlefield Road, and away in the far, far distance the sun caught a window of a house, causing it to gleam penetratingly, like a diamond in a sea of granite and concrete.*

*"Mr. Sussock?" said the nurse. Sussock found her demure and genuinely respectful, not just of him as a cop but of him as a human being. She immediately brought out his sense of protectiveness. He nailed felons to protect citizens like this nurse . . .*

# HUGO SKILLICORN AND THE KILLING MACHINE

***by PETER TURNBULL***

Donoghue pulled reflectively on his pipe and thought that they should come here, all those people who thought of Glasgow as square mile upon square mile of tenements, of disused mine and railway workings, of cranes against a grey sky hovering over an oily river, of pale children playing in stinking streets. They should come here, he told himself, to this quarter of the city, to houses like this—large, stone built, with fifteen rooms and landscaped gardens. And it was the home of just one man and his wife, exactly as the other houses in the street in Maxwell Park were single-family units. Not for these houses the ignominy of being split into bedsits or sold off as conversion flats within the shell of the original building, which in Donoghue's values was only better than demolition.

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He watched a swallow curl and dive in pursuit of a flying insect and he thought, too, that people who imagined the weather north of the border to be all mist, rain, sleet, and snow should visit Scotland at this time of the year—high summer, just a week after the longest day but still in the brief "white nights" period when it never really got dark.

It was only because he was a policeman with twenty years' experience and because he was a professional that he had been able to muster the detachment to walk out of that house, to enjoy the evening and the neighborhood. He was aware that police work affects every cop and that the effect isn't noticed by the individual officer until it has arrived and is entrenched. He had first realized this twenty years earlier when he was still a fresh-faced cop, still in uniform. He had been obliged, along with colleagues and ambulance and fire-service crews, to attend yet another car smash. It had been a very bad one—one car had been crushed into a mass half its original size and inside were the mangled remains of five human beings, none older than himself. He had helped remove the bodies.

Later he had gone home and eaten a plate of fish and chips, which he had smothered liberally with tomato ketchup, then he had gone to the pub and had a beer or two. Only at the close of the day did he suddenly realize that as a policeman, accumulating the sort of experiences that come to most people only once a lifetime, he had calmly taken in his stride a trauma that would otherwise have shaken him badly. Now, years later, he found himself calmly taking the air and enjoying the evening when inside the house was a woman whose life had all but come to an end, who now sat in a state of numbed shock in a chair in the drawing room, attended by W.P.C. Willems, while in the dining room her husband's life had completely come to an end. Bloodily.

Dr. Chan, the police surgeon, had pronounced death within fifteen seconds of kneeling beside the body and then systematically began to count the stab wounds.

"Fifteen in the front of the torso," he said. "There may be others in the rear of the body, but I won't move him, of course—it might interfere with the work of the pathologist." Chan was a small Oriental—always, thought Donoghue, highly professional. He had then stood, saying, "I'd like to stay to observe the pathologist's work, but I have a sudden death in Maryhill."

Donoghue thanked him as the doctor left the house, the locus of the offense. In the dining room, two constables stood reverently in

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the corner and a scene-of-crimes officer began to make ready his camera. The smell of death was beginning to rise. It was always the same smell—not unlike dried leaves, but sweeter and mustier. From women, from men, from the young, from the old, from the poor or from, as in this case, the rich, it was always the same. It was at that point that Donoghue, knowing his presence was not immediately required, had gone outside to enjoy the evening, and to wait for the arrival of Dr. Reynolds.

He strolled to the bottom of the drive and noticed the occasional curtain move in one or another of the neighboring houses as the police activity attracted attention. But the people who lived in Maxwell Park were discreet and polite, not venturing from their homes. In the sprawling peripheral housing schemes, any similar activity on the part of the police would cause a crowd to gather, blatantly staring, hoping to catch a glimpse of the corpse or of the arrest or whatever, but not here where the stockbrokers lived. Here, although they would surrender to a little curiosity, people minded their own affairs.

Donoghue turned and walked back up the driveway to the side of the house and then round to the rear. The only sounds were his shoes crunching the gravel and the birds singing in the warm, placid Sunday-evening air. He felt quite at home in these surroundings and, with his tailored three-piece suit, gold hunter's-chain looping across his waistcoat, and his pipe with its slightly curved stem, he would, to an onlooker, seem indeed to be quite at home. The garden at the rear of the house was landscaped. There were rockeries, shrubberies, and croquet hoops in the lawn.

A car door slamming shut penetrated the still evening and Donoghue returned to the side of the house and saw Dr. Reynolds striding purposefully up the drive. He walked toward the tall silver-haired pathologist. "Good evening, sir," he said.

"Good evening, Inspector." Reynolds nodded cheerfully. "What have you got for me?"

"One male, middle-aged, sir," said Donoghue. "Dr. Chan has pronounced him dead. Apparently from stab wounds."

"Apparently?"

"Well, that's really your department, sir." Donoghue invited Reynolds to enter the house in front of him. "But even a layman could say that the number of wounds involved wouldn't have done his health the world of good."

Reynolds stepped over the threshold into the hallway. Oak panels,

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imposing stairway. "What was the deceased's profession, do you know?"

"He was a medical man, I believe, sir. An obstetrician."

"Opposite side of the coin to me, eh? He brings them into the world, I find out what caused them to leave. Where's the corpse?"

"First door on the right, sir."

Reynolds opened the heavy oak door and Donoghue followed him into the room. A camera bulb flashed. Elliot Bothwell was dusting the room for latents. The two constables still stood in a corner awaiting instructions. The body lay as it had been found, between the dining table and the crockery cabinet.

"I see what you mean," said Reynolds. He looked down at the corpse, his heavily bloodstained shirt, the blood-soaked carpet. The dead man's right hand was tightly clenched into a fist, his left was badly lacerated. "Tried to grab the knife with his left hand, I'd say," Reynolds remarked. He knelt and prized open the right fist. A button fell onto the carpet. "Mr. Bothwell!" Donoghue called.

"Sir?" Elliot Bothwell blinked behind his thick-lensed spectacles.

"Do you have a cellophane bag? Small size?"

Bothwell walked across the room and handed Donoghue a small self-sealing cellophane sachet. Donoghue picked up the button between thumb and forefinger and dropped it into the sachet. "See if you can lift any latents from it," he said, handing the sachet to Bothwell, "then send it to the Forensic Science Lab at Pitt Street."

Reynolds glanced at Donoghue. "Most probably torn from the attacker's clothing, you think?"

"It would seem likely, sir."

Reynolds began to take notes. "Do you have any idea when this incident happened?"

"All we can tell is between three and five P.M. today," Donoghue said. "Being the times when the deceased's wife left her husband enjoyably reading the Sunday papers and returned to find him as we see him now. She didn't touch anything and managed to retain self-control long enough to phone three nines. We arrived to find her still holding the telephone in a state of deep shock. Dr. Chan prescribed a mild sedative. She's sitting in the next room—quite conscious, but not talking at all."

"Who can blame her?" Reynolds slipped a thermometer into the deceased man's mouth and used a second thermometer to measure the temperature of the room. "They've probably been married for thirty years and were looking forward to enjoying each other's com-

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pany for a good number more. One minute you see a golden road stretching before you and the very next there's nothing there but a brick wall."

"We'd like to begin interviewing as soon as we can," Donoghue said. "The trail's getting colder by the second."

"No indication of motive?" Reynolds took the thermometer from the dead man's mouth and noted the temperature.

"It doesn't appear to be robbery," Donoghue said. "There's no indication of forced entry—no evidence of anything being disturbed as we would expect to find in the case of a burglary."

Reynolds stood. "A personal motive, then?"

"It would appear so. Which is why we're doubly keen to talk to his wife. Somebody didn't like him."

Reynolds looked down at the corpse in the scarlet-stained shirt and turned to Donoghue. "That, Inspector, even for you, is something of an understatement. Well, I can't do anything else here. I'll have the body removed to the Royal Infirmary. I'll phone my findings in as soon as I can."

"He had no enemies at all," said the woman, wrapping herself tighter in a black shawl—the only suitable garment, she had apologized, that she had in her wardrobe. In the twenty-four hours since she had discovered her husband's mutilated corpse, she seemed, to a stunned and shocked Elka Willems, to have aged ten to fifteen years. Richard King, who took the statement, never having seen her before, assumed that she normally looked like this—grey hair, drawn face, sunken, distant eyes, hunched frame—but Elka could recall the woman she had seen before, a full face atop a proudly held body. "He had no enemies," the widow said.

"Mr. Skillicorn was a doctor, I understand," King prompted gently. Detective Constable King had been introduced to Mrs. Skillicorn by Elka some ten minutes earlier and so far the only information he had been able to elicit from Mrs. Skillicorn was that her husband had had no enemies.

"Yes, Mr. King," said the woman. "He was an obstetrician. He worked at the Victoria Infirmary but he also had private patients."

King wrote neatly on his pad in ballpoint. He was a chubby, bearded man, twenty-five years of age. Elka Willems sat silently beside him. She was a tall, blonde policewoman, whose blue eyes and high cheekbones betrayed her Dutch ancestry as much as did

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her name. She kept her hair in a tight bun while on duty, but even in the full tunic in the winter months she would cause heads to turn.

"You left the house at three P.M. yesterday?" King asked.

"I did." The woman paused long enough for King to have cause to worry that he was going to have to prize each word out of her, or even be content with a shake or a nod of the head. But then she continued: "I visited friends in Milngavie. I called in for tea—it's a pattern which has established itself over the years, two hours on Sunday afternoon for tea and cakes. When I left our home, Hugo was reading the Sunday papers. When I returned—"

"You and Mr. Skillicorn lived alone, I take it?"

"Yes. We have a gardener and a maid, but they don't live in. We have three grown children, each of whom lives abroad."

"All three?" said King—sorry as soon as he had spoken.

"Yes. All three. Two sons and a daughter. All three are doctors, all have married other doctors. One lives in Australia, another in Canada—and our daughter is with her husband in Africa, where he is studying tropical medicine."

"Have you contacted them?" King asked her.

She nodded. "I phoned Nigel in Perth—Perth, Australia."

"Yes, of course."

"He said he'd make sure he contacted the others and would then come straight home. That was yesterday. He'll be home later today. I declare, the wonders of modern technology—telephone link-up by satellite and modern jet aircraft means that even if your son lives on the other side of the world he can still be home at the drop of a hat within twenty-four hours. Australia isn't so far away if you look at it like that."

"I suppose not," said King. "When you returned home yesterday, you didn't notice any sign of forced entry, no struggle?"

"There had been a struggle in the dining room. The furniture was disturbed a little and the carpet kicked up at the corner. I noticed that after I saw Hugo. We always keep a clean and tidy home. I managed to phone you—"

"Yes." King nodded. "I understood that you kept calm long enough to do the right thing. Thank you. Nothing else was disturbed?"

"No. The constables checked every room, every cupboard, under every bed to see if he was still in the house. When they told me it was safe, I looked over the house quickly to see if anything was stolen and nothing has been touched. There was, in fact, some fifty

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pounds lying on the dressing table in the bedroom and it's still there. Really, Mr. King, nothing has been taken."

"No forced entry, no robbery, no sign of really violent struggle. A popular man with no enemies, yet he was stabbed several times in his own home."

"Hacked to death would be my description," said Mrs. Skillicorn.

Donoghue read Elliot Bothwell's report. He found it spare, just the nuts and bolts, but its contents were nonetheless interesting. The locus of the offense was in Bothwell's view "forensic friendly." The phrase jarred Donoghue's classically trained mind. He assumed Bothwell meant that the dining room was clean, the surfaces waxed, and good latents were able to be lifted. There were, apparently, four sets of latents, three of which could be identified as belonging to the deceased, the wife of the deceased, and the maid. The fourth latent could not be identified but did not belong to the gardener, whose prints Bothwell had taken that Monday morning. The fourth latent was also found on the button the deceased had had clenched in his fist. The mysterious latent was not on computer file in Glasgow. The Police National Computer at Hendon, England, had yet to come back to P Division, at the time of the writing, to indicate whether or not it was on the national records.

Donoghue set Bothwell's report to one side and picked up the report submitted by Jean Kay of the Forensic Science Laboratory. Donoghue knew Jean Kay well and liked her. She was a small, wiry woman in her sixties and held a Ph.D. in Chemistry from one of Britain's leading universities, Donoghue could not recall which one. Her reputation and the reputation of the laboratory she ran were such that her services were unashamedly sought by the police forces of the Highlands and Islands region, the Tayside and Grampian forces, the Central force, and the Dumfries and Galloway police. Only the professionally competitive Lothian and Borders force showed any reluctance to approach her.

Her report, as befitted a woman of her learning, was fuller than Bothwell's but nevertheless gave Donoghue very little to go on. All the blood on the clothing was AB negative, the blood group of the deceased. If the attacker was wounded and bled in the affray, then he by sheer coincidence must also be blood group AB negative. But, she concluded, the balance of probability was that all the blood came from the deceased. There was little to identify the button which had apparently been found in the hand of the deceased, but it was not

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a part of the clothing worn by the deceased at the time of death. The deceased had obviously bled profusely, the attack had been carried out by a knife, as indicated by the slashing of the clothing. She expected the pathologist might have more to say on the matter, but she was certain the attacker must have left the locus of the offense well covered with his victim's blood. It would have been a conspicuous site, she thought, on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of summer. She regretted, in a single-line paragraph, that she could not have been of greater assistance.

The phone on Donoghue's desk rang. He took the pipe from his mouth and propped it in the huge black ashtray on his desk. He picked up the receiver and, turning to a blank page in his notepad, said, "D.I. Donoghue."

"Reynolds here," said the calm voice on the other end of the line.

"Yes, sir."

"I've completed the postmortem." Reynolds spoke unhurriedly. "Death was caused by stab wounds. One wound particularly pierced the aorta but any of half a dozen others could have killed him."

"I see." Donoghue wrote on his pad.

"The weapon in question seems to be about five inches long, but wider than a kitchen knife."

"Like a commando knife?"

"That sort of thing, yes. He sustained seventeen wounds in all, all to the anterior of the torso."

"The front of the chest."

"Yes. Nothing below the waist or above the shoulders. Six wounds were particularly penetrating and deadly. He was a well nourished man, unlike most of our profession."

"Oh?"

"Well, you know what they say—an alcoholic is someone who drinks more than his doctor. There's a lot of truth in jest. We are a notoriously alcoholic profession, but Hugo Skillicorn had a very healthy liver and kidneys. There's really nothing else I can add. My report will be typed up and sent over to you as soon as possible."

Donoghue thanked him and replaced the receiver. He picked up his pipe from the ashtray and held it by its stem as he scraped the bowl with his penknife. Then he pulled the stem apart and cleaned the interior with a pipe cleaner, wincing at the oily nicotine and tar that had accumulated. He refilled the bowl with a plug of the special mixture he had made up for him by a city tobacconist: a Dutch base for taste, with a twist of dark shag for depth of flavor and a slower

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burning rate. He placed the flame of his gold-plated lighter over the bowl and drew lovingly on the smoke. Now where do we go? he thought.

On the thirteenth of May, 1568, a Scots army under Mary Queen of Scots was defeated by another Scots army commanded by the regent, James Stewart, Earl of Moray. Battle was joined in a field south of the Clyde, close to the River Cart near the small town of Glasgow. The site of the battle was later appropriately named Battlefield. Glasgow expanded in the Nineteenth Century—"exploded" may be the better word—and the site of the battle was built over. Closely packed tenements for the new middle classes spread over the scene of the earlier carnage, and the new district of the city retained the name of Battlefield. In the center of the new housing on the hill called Battlefield Road, and adjoining Battle Place with the monument, a hospital was built. It was named the Victoria Infirmary in honor of the reigning monarch, who by then was Queen of both Scots and English.

Ray Sussock turned off Battlefield Road and parked his car on Langside Road. He left the window of his car slightly open to allow the interior to ventilate in the heat and then walked, enjoying the day, to the administrative block of "the Vicky."

"Detective Sergeant Sussock," he said to the receptionist, and showed his I.D. The receptionist was a handsome man, and a little smug because of it, thought Sussock. He nodded to Sussock a grudging acknowledgment of rank and Sussock enjoyed the young man's confusion—respect for a cop, contempt for an old man of shabby untidy appearance. "Yes, sir?" he said.

"I have an appointment with Dr. Paxton."

The receptionist turned to the phone and dialed an internal number. It was an old telephone system of heavy black bakelite and Sussock distinctly heard the solid burr, burr as the phone rang at the other end of the line. He fancied that even at this distance he would be able to hear both sides of the conversation. He wasn't disappointed.

"Porter's lodge," said the receptionist. "There's a Detective Sergeant Sussock here to see Dr. Paxton."

"Wait a minute. —Yes, he's expected. Ask him to come up, please and someone will meet him."

"Okay." The receptionist turned to Sussock. "If you'd like to take the lift to the fourth floor, sir—"

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"Someone will meet me," said Sussock. "Thank you."

The lift, like the telephone system, was the original, the first to be installed and still providing sterling service, with brass telescoping doors and solid wood paneling smelling strongly of polish. Sussock pressed the button marked 4. The lift hesitated for a moment and then began a slow, uneven ascent. It slowed to a stop, then jerked up another six inches, and only then did the light behind the figure 4 above the door shine on. Sussock wrenched open the lift door, then the shaft door, and shut both behind him.

A nurse in a starched white smock stood in the corridor, which smelled of disinfectant. The tall windows allowed the interior of the hospital to flood with light and permitted an impressive view of the rooftops of Battlefield and Langside. Sussock saw an orange bus go down Battlefield Road, and away in the far, far distance the sun caught a window of a house, causing it to gleam penetratingly, like a diamond in a sea of granite and concrete.

"Mr. Sussock?" said the nurse. Sussock found her demure and genuinely respectful, not just of him as a cop but of him as a human being. She immediately brought out his sense of protectiveness. He nailed felons to protect citizens like this nurse.

"Yes." He smiled.

"If you'd like to step this way, sir. Dr. Paxton is expecting you."

Sussock followed her down the corridor, at her side, half a step behind. She didn't talk, and Sussock felt that, like the children who were brought up in the era that the Victorian Infirmary was built, she would speak only if spoken to. The walk down the corridor was long, and silent save for his footfall. Like all nurses, she wore soft-soled shoes and made no sound as she walked.

They came to a ward. In an anteroom near the entrance, a middle-aged man sat at a desk. The nurse stopped at the door and said, "Mr. Sussock, sir."

The man stood and extended a hand to Sussock. He had a warm, beaming face behind heavy-rimmed spectacles. Sussock, after his brief bad first impression at the porter's lodge, was beginning to like the staff at the Vicky. "Paxton, Mr. Sussock," said the man, shaking Sussock's hand. "Please take a seat."

Sussock sat. He thought Paxton was about as old as himself—sixty this year—but he looked to be fitter than Sussock—with his bad chest, a legacy of years of cigarette smoking—felt himself to be. But police work had helped Sussock to remain slim. Paxton was swelling noticeably about his middle and his face, though by his cheery man-

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ner it was clear that he wasn't at all embarrassed by it. They had, Sussock thought, probably led a parallel existence in the city, though they were now meeting for the first time. How often in the last sixty years, he wondered, had they shared the same bus, passed each other in the town, shivered on the same cold days?

"What can I do for you, Mr. Sussock?" Paxton asked. "I gather you have called about the dreadful incident yesterday?"

"In respect to Mr. Skillicorn, sir? Yes, that's why I'm here."

"He'll be a sad loss to the hospital. He was a good doctor, a good obstetrician."

"He was a colleague of yours?"

"Well, he was a colleague of all of us. A hospital is like a ship—it doesn't work unless we all play our part, from the captain on the bridge down to the chap who stokes the boiler. But I know what you mean. I daresay I worked more closely with him than anyone else."

"He was murdered," said Sussock. "His house wasn't ransacked, there was no robbery, no forced entry. The murder took place when Mrs. Skillicorn was out of the house, which indicates that the murderer may have been watching the house, waiting for the moment to strike."

"That's chilling," Paxton murmured. He sat back in his chair and slipped his spectacles off and laid them on the desk. "We knew he had been murdered, but I confess we know no details."

"He seems to have been murdered for a personal reason."

"Well, I can assure you he had no enemies in the hospital."

"What about outside?"

"I know little of his personal affairs."

"I see." Sussock took out his pad and began to take notes. "What about his relationship with his patients?"

Paxton shuffled uncomfortably. "Well—" he put on his spectacles "—he was recently subject to a complaint."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Not what I would call serious in nature. It was a question of alleged misconduct rather than negligence. He put up a defense and the British Medical Authority upheld his defense. In a nutshell, he terminated a pregnancy. The woman in question was psychiatrically ill. She suffered bouts of depression—not by any means acute enough to warrant her admission to hospital, but it was a significant illness. She asked her G.P. for a termination and the G.P. considered her to be sound enough of mind to know what she was asking. Hugo also spoke to her, and on the strength of the G.P.'s view and on his

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own discussion with her agreed to perform the termination. Weeks later, the husband—she was a married woman—the husband came storming in here, rowed with Hugo, and stormed out again. Then he made the complaint and, as I said, the B.M.A. upheld Hugo's defense. That was the last we heard of it."

"So the husband didn't know anything of his wife's termination before the fact?"

"No." Paxton took off his spectacles again. Sussock had the impression Paxton wore his glasses when he felt under threat and took them off when he felt on firmer footing. "It isn't a requirement in law nor is it a requirement in the National Health Service guidelines which we follow. We pursue a policy of the woman's right to choose. I daresay it's not wholly ethical to keep the husband in the dark, but it's a dilemma that crops up in other areas of medicine. When should a doctor violate the confidentiality of the relationship with a patient? What does the family doctor do when the fifteen-year-old daughter of a patient asks for help with birth control? Does he give advice, in which case he is colluding with underage sex, or does he notify the girl's parents, in which case he has violated the relationship with his patient, which ought to be as confidential as a confessional?"

"It's not easy, is it?"

"It isn't—and often as not, a termination is requested in order to save a marriage."

"To save it?"

"Yes. If, for example, the father of the unwanted child is not the woman's husband and for a variety of reasons the husband knows the child could not be his, that is something we would rather not be involved in. We believe that if the husband or father of the child should be informed, it is the responsibility of the woman to inform him. She has the right to choose termination, and she also has the right to decide whether the father of the child is to be notified. You may think sterilization is the male equivalent, but because it is virtually irreversible, we require the full consent of a wife before sterilizing a husband."

"But abortion—"

"I don't like that word."

"I'm sorry—termination, then. That is entirely the woman's decision?"

"Yes. It's an emotive subject. We won't terminate beyond the thirteenth week, when we deem the fetus to be alive, unless the mother's

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health is in danger, and we won't terminate if the woman is not of sound mind when she asks for the termination."

"Which in this case she was—I mean of sound mind."

Paxton's eyeglasses were on again. "We were aware of her depressive episodes, but Hugo and the G.P. believed she still was able to retain a grasp of the issues. It may even be that Hugo and the G.P. felt that the danger of postnatal depression, on top of an already present depressive illness, would have been fatal for both mother and child, and as the woman in question was still well within her childbearing years a good argument could be made for allowing her time to recover from her illness before continuing to have her family."

"Continuing?"

"She had two children already. Two kids, a difficult husband apparently, depression—not to be dismissed as an illness—an unwanted pregnancy for whatever reason. Yes, I can see why the G.P. and Hugo felt that termination was a reasonable request to accede to."

"You certainly make a good case, Dr. Paxton, even to a layman."

"Well, I think it was the illness that clinched it. Even otherwise-healthy mothers have been known to throw their babies out of the window when suffering postnatal depression. In some cases they follow the child down, so that it becomes a double tragedy. In this case, it seemed reasonable to agree to the termination."

"Can I have the lady's name, please?"

Paxton leaned toward his desk, shuffled some files, and selecting one. "Muirhead, Jean," he said. "Aged twenty-five, address in Castlemilk."

Donoghue phoned the Press Office and requested a press release: The Maxwell Park murder, Sunday between 1500 and 1700 hours, the murderer probably heavily stained with blood, did you see anybody, did anybody come home to your house or your neighbor's house like that?

"That sort of thing," said Donoghue. "I'll leave the exact wording up to you, but will you clear the final copy with me before you release it? Thank you."

From the Victoria Infirmary, Sussock drove the short distance to a house in Langside. He climbed the stairs and stopped when he came to a door marked WILLEMS. He tapped on the door. When she

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opened it, she had changed out of her uniform and her blonde hair was down about her shoulders. She was dressed in a short brown mini-robe that revealed her long slender legs. Behind her, in a recess just off the kitchen, steam was pouring from the shower cubicle.

"You'll lose your hot water," Sussock told her.

She smiled and went to the shower and wound the silver knob into the wall. "You've been known to call at more convenient times," she said.

"I'll leave if you like." Sussock stepped inside and shut the door behind him.

"No, you won't." She slipped his jacket off his shoulders and pecked his cheek. "Now you're here, you'll stay."

He held her about the hips. "I can't stay that long. I'm at work. I'm just observing the old Glasgow tradition of dropping in on folk."

"Well, just drop into the chair in the living room, old Sussock, and I'll fix you a coffee." She turned. Then she turned back. "Is that all I mean to you? Just someone to drop in on?"

He smiled. "I've come out of my way to see you. I should be rushing back to Donoghue with information, but I'm here."

"I saw the paper," said the sobbing woman. "I know he's a violent man, I know he's a bad swine when he's got a drink in him, but I didn't think he'd do anything like this."

"Yes, madam." Donoghue pinned the phone between his ear and shoulder while he struggled to free his ballpoint from the spine of his notepad. Then he asked, "Are you still there?"

Silence.

"Madam?"

"Yes—" She was fighting back emotion. "I'm still here."

"You saw the paper—you mean the *Evening Times*?"

"Yes, the early edition—about the man who was stabbed to death."

"Yes?" Donoghue coaxed. "Don't hang up—in the name of heaven, don't hang up—"

"My husband. It—was my husband."

"Can I have your name, madam?"

"Mrs. Muirhead. Bogbain Road, Castlemilk. My husband is at home at the moment. He's a violent man."

"You're not in your home at the moment?"

"No, I'm phoning from a neighbor's."

"We'll be coming to arrest your husband on suspicion. It's up to you whether you want to be there or not."

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"I'd rather not. My kids are here with me. Just don't tell him I shopped him." She hung up.

As Donoghue put the phone down, Sussock tapped on the door and entered Donoghue's office. "I have a name and address," said Sussock triumphantly.

"Muirhead—Bogbain Road, Castlemilk," said Donoghue.

"How did you know that?" Sussock asked. Then belatedly added, "Sir."

Donoghue and Sussock drove to Bogbain Road in Castlemilk. A patrol car with two uniformed officers followed in close company. Castlemilk sprawled over the hillside, a postwar project of high-rises and low-rises, densely packed. It is in terms of its population the largest housing scheme in Europe. Donoghue drew his Rover to a halt outside the address in Bogbain Road. It was an appropriate name for the road, he thought, as he negotiated the dog excrement on the footpath beside the untended front garden. The Muirheads lived two up left on the urine-stenching, graffiti-covered stairs. Donoghue rapped on the door.

It was opened by a well built man in his thirties, dressed in Army fatigues.

"Police," said Donoghue. He flashed his I.D.

"You didn't waste any time," said the man. He showed not the slightest hint of violence, and Donoghue knew instantly that there would be no resisting of arrest.

"So you know why we're here?" Donoghue asked.

The man said nothing, just turned and walked back inside the dimly lit flat. Donoghue, Sussock, and the two uniformed constables followed.

The living room of the flat was more in keeping with an Army barracks than a family home. There was little evidence of a wife and children living there, but plenty of evidence of a soldier—camouflage jackets, books, bayonets, knives, maps, compasses, everything short of a firearm.

Muirhead stood facing the policemen, deferential to authority, but the sort of man who would, thought Donoghue, lay down the law to his wife and children. "I'm in the Territorial Army," he explained. "More or less full-time since I lost my job."

"So which knife did you kill him with?" said Donoghue.

"That one," said Muirhead, with a sudden frankness that disarmed the four men.

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"We'll have to take you in," said Donoghue.

Sussock picked up the commando knife to which Muirhead had pointed. "Why did you kill him?"

"He killed my child."

"There may have been a good reason for that."

"Look, my wife is sick, I can see that. She sees our doctor for depression. She's not in a fit state to decide whether she wants a child or not. He should have seen that. He had no right to pull my life out of her and throw it in an incinerator. That was my child—it wasn't *his* life inside her, it was *mine*. He had no right to keep me in the dark."

"You complained. That should have been enough."

"It did no good. The medical people, they just cover up for each other."

"So you killed him."

"Aye. Wouldn't you?"

"No."

"I found out where he lived and I waited in the shrubs. I waited a long time. I've been trained in certain things. I went there late Saturday and waited. I didn't get a chance to move until yesterday afternoon. Lying still for nearly twenty-four hours was tough, but I'm a warrior—I do what I need to do. When it was clear he was alone I went up to the door, rang the bell, pushed my way in when he answered it, and stuck him like a pig. He ran to the dining room, bleeding. I followed and made sure he knew who I was and why I was going to kill him. A life for a life, I said. Then I started to puncture him, around the heart. I'm a killing machine when I want to be. I've been trained like that."

Later, Donoghue bought Sussock a beer in a bar.

"It's never really cut-and-dried, is it, Ray?" he said, handing the older man his drink. "If he pleads guilty due to diminished responsibility, he'll be out in three years. Good health."

"Q"

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BEAUTIFUL GIRLS SEEK FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE. American—Mexican—Philippine—European. Photo selection FREE! Latins, Box 1716-DD, Chula Vista, CA 92012.

NATIONWIDE Singles Magazine. Send Name, Address, Age. Send No Money. Exchange, 1817 Welton, #1580, Denver, Colorado 80202.

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# ELLERY QUEEN

## CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
**Classified Advertising Department Suite 1401**
**380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017**

**15 WORD MINIMUM**
Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
**SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER**

**DEADLINE:** Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

**(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)**

**YOUR NAME**_____

**FIRM (NAME IN AD)**_____

**ADDRESS**_____

**CITY**_____ **STATE**_____ **ZIP**_____

**PHONE:**_____ **DATE:**_____

**YOUR SIGNATURE**_____

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ .....

_____ Capitalized word at .40¢ each _____
Total amount for 1 ad $

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 – $
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85
(c) Total amount for 3 ads $

(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 months – $144.00 x .85 – $122.40)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

*(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)*

| | | | | |
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| (1) **$48.00** | (2) **$48.00** | (3) **$48.00** | (4) **$48.00** | (5) **$48.00** |
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**HOW TO COUNT WORDS:** Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. Mark Holly 380 Lexington Avenue New York, New York 10017 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted. Phone # 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each. Garden City, New York 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D. F.O.B. P.O. U.S.A. 7x10 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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**12 *NEW* stories—including**

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**HUGH PENTECOST (about Uncle George Crowder)**

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**CLARK HOWARD (about silhouettes)**

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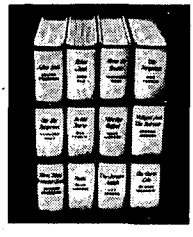

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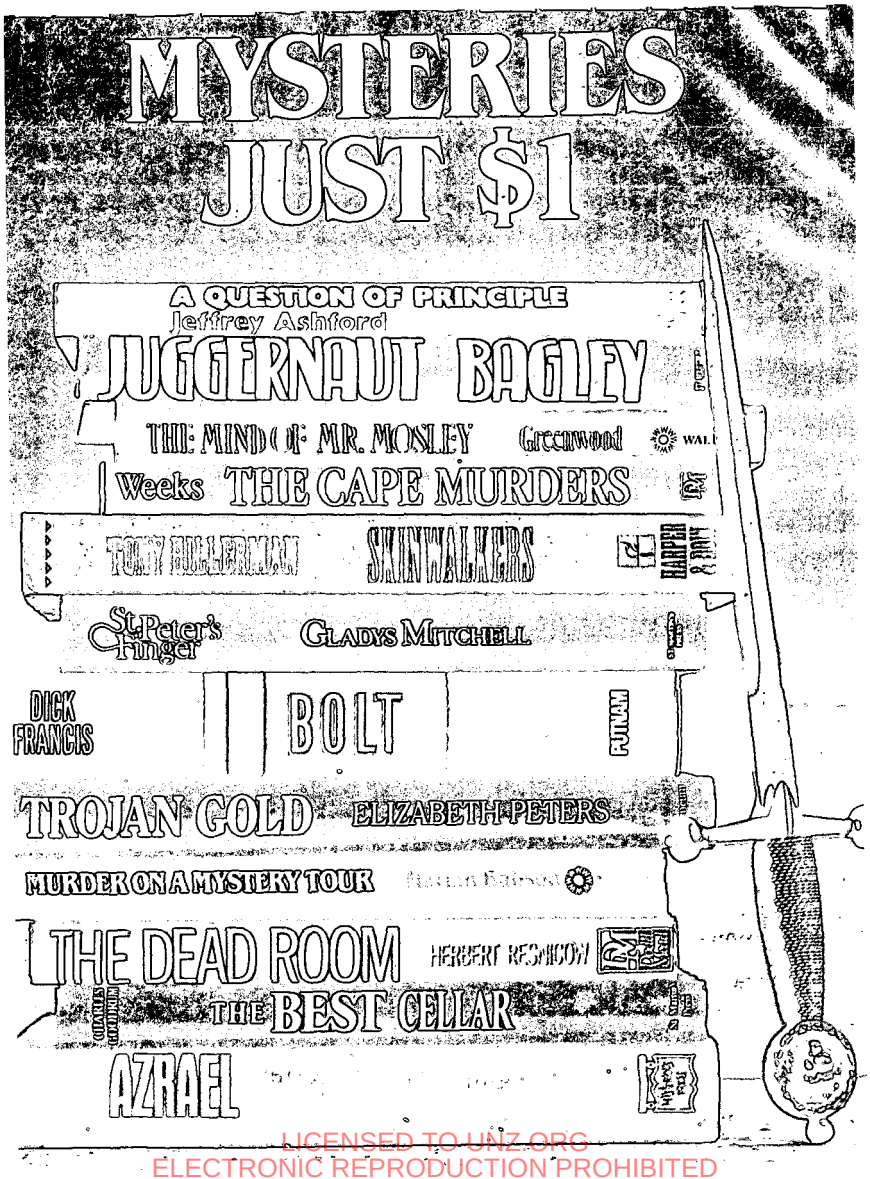


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